●谷川 流（たにがわ ながる）
兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』シリーズも刊行中。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生七転八倒中。今一番欲しいものは予知能力と脳内バッテリー充電装置。

カバーイラスト／いとうのいぢ
カバーデザイン／中デザイン事務所

谷川 流（ながる）

涼宮ハルヒの動揺

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谷川 流
涼宮ハルヒの動揺
角川スニーカー文庫

The Wavering of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Translated by: Baka-Tsuki

Live A Live

This happened in my first year in high school.

The year when the humanoid climatic anomaly known as Suzumiya Haruhi began her rampage, and also the most eventful year in my life. A year that gives me enough to fret about just by thinking back on all the troublesome events. When looking through my memory photo album, I found all sorts of jaw dropping things that had happened. One of these little events still makes a deep impression in the back of my mind, so allow me to share it with everyone.

It was a time when the remnant summer heat refuses to leave the islands, making one suspect that someone had accidentally triggered a weather changing mechanism, since the calendar was already pointing to an autumn season.

It was the day of the school festival.

From declaring the making of the movie all the way to completing all the editing works, the ever insane director and executive producer had created a mess more confusing than any of the special effects added for the actors and crew involved.

In the end, it was thanks to me that the movie can be sorted out properly.

Today was the first day of the school festival, and also the premiere of the movie. I don't know whether this movie titled *The Adventures of Asahina Mikuru Episode 00* should be classified as a movie or a personal advertisement for Asahina-san. I suppose it's now being shown with great reviews.

Why did I say "suppose"? That's because I no longer want to see my name associated with that crap movie that literally challenges the laws of physics. So after handing the tape to the Movie Study Group, I decided to take a stroll around and relax.

Fortunately, when it comes to taking care of the small details and the diplomatic duty of promoting the movie, Haruhi becomes even more energetic as usual, ever leading the way as the commander.

She probably doesn't give a damn about the teachers and students, who by now have gotten used to her antics, but she should at least give some consideration for the parents and people from out of school who would be visiting today, because right now she's wearing her bunny costume that was last worn earlier this spring! But thanks to this, Asahina-san, Nagato and Koizumi can now concentrate on preparing for their classes' festival activities, which weren't as boring as mine and Haruhi's class 1-5.

So right now I feel like the storm has finally subsided, my mind as clear as the mirror surface of a calm lake. Once the digital editing of the movie was done, my work was complete. I shook my

sleepy head and decided to take a look at Nagato's divinations, and maybe laugh at Koizumi's crap acting for his class theatre. It may be a generic school festival by a lowly prefectural high school, but it is a festival after all, so it's not a bad thing to go out and experience something you don't get to see every day.

Besides, today I have a duty that I must attend to, and that duty is now being clutched in my hand as a piece of paper.

Of course, that piece of paper is none other than a discount coupon for Asahina-san's class' noodle stall.

No matter how cheap the tea leaves, once brewed by the hands of Asahina-san, would turn into a heavenly elixir. So I'm sure a dish of fried noodles made by the same pair of hands would rival the best a top-class Chinese restaurant has to offer. As I walked up the stairs, my expectation for how my stomach would grumble at the scent of it was constantly rising, while my footsteps were so light I felt like flying.

As I began my ascent into heaven in excitement, someone doused a cold bucket of water over my head,

"It could have been better if they had offered us a coupon where we can eat for free."

The only person in this world who would complain so much was none other than Taniguchi. I only decided to invite him seeing how pitiful he was after falling into the pond when helping out as a movie extra, plus this was an opportunity of a lifetime. Otherwise I wouldn't even consider him at all. What more could he ask for?

"I gave my all helping you guys out, and I'm still waiting for my pay! You should at least invited me to the movie premiere. Don't tell me you've cut out all my scenes. A 30% discount coupon just for nearly getting drowned is too cheap a reward!"

Stop picking on the small details. Asahina-san has given us these coupons out of kindness so we could come to her class' noodle stall! Besides, the most underpaid actress was Asahina-san herself. I even wanted to call up the Selection Committee for the Academy Awards and persuade them to give her an Oscar.

"If you don't feel like coming, hurry up and get lost!"

Hearing me say that, the other person that came along decided to mediate,

"Come on, Taniguchi, let's go together. Since you had just wanted to stroll around on your own. It's better sitting together than walking all alone."

That was my classmate Kunikida, who unlike Taniguchi had the looks of a bright student.

“Besides, since we’re going with Kyon, we may even receive more offers. Like offering us more Kimchi, don’t you always like Korean food, Taniguchi?”

“Well, sort of.”

Taniguchi replied swiftly.

“That would have to depend on how it tastes. Kyon, Asahina-san’s not cooking, is she?”

Hearing that question, I remembered Asahina-san telling me she was only in charge of serving food and drinks. So what about it?

“Oh nothing, I was just thinking Asahina-san’s probably crap at cooking. I wouldn’t be surprised even if she put in sugar instead of salt for flavouring.”

It’s not that I want to complain, but just what are you and Haruhi treating Asahina-san as? Though she may be good at being a mascot and a maid, in this day and age, you would only find people who mistake sugar for salt in a fantasy world. Asahina-san would only panic when losing her time-travelling device, though that fact alone was enough to make me wonder if she’s really from the future.

“I’m really looking forward to this,” said Kunikida, “I hear their class is going to have a cosplay cafe. Asahina-san’s waitress costume in the movie and the bunny girl costume the other day were all stunning, I wonder what she’ll be wearing this time?”

“I can’t wait to see.”

Taniguchi agreed soundly. These two were unlike me, who had gotten used to seeing Asahina-san in her maid costume every day. I suddenly felt pity for them.

Coming out from the stairs and into the corridor, I too began to visualize what I would see. Speaking of waitresses, all my dirty mind could think of was that tight uniform she wore in the movie, giving me a great urge to want to molest her. Though today she would be wearing an adorable elegant waitress uniform, gracefully serving food and drinks. With such scenery to cleanse the eyes and soul, what more could one ask for? I always thought Haruhi’s preferred costumes were too complicated, after all, she was insane enough to stand at the school entrance dressing up as a bunny girl. These thick, steel-like nerves would probably suit a rough girl like her, but not everyone possesses nerves of steel.

Asahina-san wearing the waitress costumes hand-made by her classmates……

Only on this matter was I able to agree enthusiastically with Taniguchi: I’m very much looking forward to this. Very.

Today the school corridors were laid with green grass mats that were no different from those inexpensive red carpets.

Normally students have to change into their indoor shoes when entering the school, but for the visitors' convenience, for today and tomorrow the school allowed people to enter wearing shoes for the duration of the school festival. All sorts of people appeared in the school as a result. This was especially true for those from the arts clubs, whose families have come to see their various performances. The school became a place for the local neighbourhood to kill time. There were also the students' old junior high classmates, who came to visit from their various high schools, especially those from the girls' school at the base of the hill. This became a once-in-a-year opportunity for the guys here to try their luck with them; certainly, that included Taniguchi.

On the corridor where anything but a North High uniform would draw attention, the three of us were like sardines swimming towards a bait, and wandered along the corridor where the second year classrooms were, finally stopping before the classroom, which was between one that held mole-bashing games and one that provided balloons to visitors.

The scent of burnt teriyaki travelled out from the entrance, which had a sign that read "NoodleAhs and Drinks Stall". The queue outside this classroom was longer than any other classroom. Before we came to this meandering queue, a voice shouted,

"Ah! Kyon-kun, you came with your friends as well! Welcome! Come this way!"

That was a crispy clear voice and beaming smile that I would recognize even from ten yards away. Besides the troublesome Haruhi, I know only one other person who could smile so happily.

It was none other than Tsuruya-san, and here she was dressed up in her waitress costume.

Standing by the tables outside on the corridors and waving at us, Tsuruya-san seems to be in charge of selling tickets, as well as attracting customers.

"Well? What you think of this costume? It looks great, doesn't it?"

Tsuruya-san moved with agility through the crowd and towards us.

"Of course it does."

I adopted a low profile approach when looking at Tsuruya-san.

I was so busy visualizing Asahina-san in her maid costume that I've forgotten that Tsuruya-san was in the same class as she was. Taniguchi and Kunikida had the look of a fisher that fished a flatfish, but found out that it comes along with a guppy biting its tail, and just looked astonished at this long-haired sempai. Couldn't really blame them, really. I don't know who designed this costume, but there must definitely be an expert fashion designer in their class. It was of a different style to the strange costumes Asahina-san was forced to wear for the movie. It wasn't

too extravagant, nor was it too generic. It gave elegance to whoever wears it, yet not overshadowing any glamor from the wearer herself, bringing the charm of the wearer to the maximum. It could easily be the best fashion design of the year.

Anyway, the costume was so good it can only be described in such abstract terms. If Tsuruya-san was already so stunning in this costume, I think I would probably be paralysed by the sight of Asahina-san wearing it.

"Business sure is good."

Hearing me say that,

"Nya ha ha ha……Come on in then!"

Ignoring the glares from the other people, Tsuruya-san elegantly lifted her apron and said,

"We used the cheapest ingredients to fry our noodles, and it tastes terrible. Yet we still get so many customers, we're making so much money that I can't stop smiling!"

Tsuruya-san sure looked really happy. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why everyone queueing up for this noodle stall were all guys. Tsuruya-san's smiles carried a certain magic in them, even I was infected by her cheerfulness. After all, it's men that are more easily deceived.

We stood at the end of the long queue, Tsuruya-san continued serving her smile for free,

"Please pay first! We only have fried noodles and water! One plate costs 300 yen, while you can drink all the tap water for free!"

I gave her the discount coupons.

"Hmm, three is it? Then that'll be 500 yen for the three of you. A great discount!"

She stuffed the coins into her apron pocket, then gave us three fried noodle vouchers.

"Alright then, please wait a moment! It'll be your turn soon!"

Having said that, Tsuruya-san turned and returned to the table by the entrance. The coins in her apron pocket rang soundly as she disappeared within the queueing crowd.

"She sure is energetic. How come she never gets tired?"

Kunikida said looking impressed, while Taniguchi lowered his voice and said,

"Kyon, I've been thinking about this for some time now. Who is that anyway? One of you and Suzumiya's accomplices?"

“No~~pe.”

Just like you guys, Tsuruya-san is not of our club. She’s mainly used to make up the numbers whenever it was necessary, it’s just that she always seems to appear at the right time.

For Tsuruya-san, “a moment” probably meant a little over half an hour, because we had to wait for about thirty minutes before we finally arrived at the front of the queue and was let in the classroom. While we were waiting, the queues behind us never stopped growing, and they were all guys……it was an unbelievable scene. Though we’re not qualified to say anything about them since we were part of the queue as well.

The classroom was divided into two halves, one as a makeshift kitchen and the other as a seating area. The frying pans made loud sizzling noises from the frying of the noodles. The cooks were girls wearing white Japanese-style aprons, chopping up the ingredients with their knives were also girls. This made me wonder, where did all the guys in this class go? And what were they doing?

I later learnt from Tsuruya-san that all the poor guys were basically serving as slaves for the girls, either being sent out to buy any insufficient ingredients and utensils, or to get water and wash the dishes. I guess it couldn’t be helped, the “Age of Aquarius” has truly arrived. Tsuruya-san brought us to our seats and said,

“Here’s your table. Three drinks for the customers here!”

An adorable voice replied at the sempai’s calling,

“Coming~~. Ah, welcome.”

Even if I didn’t mention, I’m sure most of you must have guessed who it was coming over, carrying a tray with cups of water on it.

After handing out our drinks, she carried the tray with her arms and bowed politely to us,

“Welcome! Thank you for coming to our little food stall!”

She smiled gently at us,

“Hi, Kyon-kun, and your friends……um, you were the movie extras……”

The two people besides me said at the same time,

“I’m Taniguchi!”

“I’m Kunikida.”

“Hee hee, I’m Asahina Mikuru.”

There hanging on the classroom wall was a poster that read “No photos!” That move was understandable, since if photos were allowed, the room would fall into chaos, and not a lot of business would be made.

It’s natural for the adorable Asahina-san to be able to charm the whole school. As expected, my consciousness flew into the air at the sight of her costume, there was no need for any words to further describe her cuteness. Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san were just so beautiful standing together that I wanted to award them with a best waitress costume design award. I guess heaven would be some place full with sceneries like that.

Asahina-san put the tray under her arm and tore the noodle coupons into two halves, returning one half to us, she said,

“Please wait a moment.”

Under the watchful eyes of all the guys, she ran quickly to the makeshift kitchen. Tsuruya-san smiled and explained,

“Mikuru is only in charge of receiving vouchers, collecting dishes and serving water. That’s all she does! What would we do if she accidentally trips over and burns herself with sizzling hot noodles? This is why we need to give our cover girl the best protection possible!”

You’re absolutely right, Tsuruya-san.

Serving us with our noodles was another second year waitress. The price of having more Kimchi was that we now have less meat, the noodles were normal at best, all we could taste was the sauce, it wasn’t really that great. Like a humming bird, Asahina-san now jumped from table to table serving water for the new customers and receiving vouchers. She would occasionally come and pour some cold water for us, which wasn’t really that cold. That was the best she could do. Tsuruya-san was also busy coming in and out of the entrance receiving customers. It just didn’t feel good for us to sit too long.

It took only five minutes for us to finish our noodles, and besides leaving quickly, there was nothing else we could do. Yet we were not quite full.

“Now what should we do?”

Kunikida asked,

“I want to go see the movie Kyon made, just to make sure I’m in it. What about you, Taniguchi?”

“I’m not going to waste my time watching such a movie!”

Taniguchi refused stubbornly and took out an itinerary flyer for the school festival from his pocket.

“There wasn’t that much to eat at that noodle stall, I’m going to the Science Club’s barbecue party! But before that……”

He gave an evil grin,

“I must make good use of this great opportunity, I’m going to go hook up with some girls! All my targets today are girls in casual wear. If you look carefully you would find three girls walking happily together. Surprisingly, if you flirt with those, half of them would actually agree to go out with you. These all came from my past experience of flirting with girls.”

To hell with your flirting experiences, so far your success rate has been close to zero, what use can I have with such experiences?

I quickly shook my head,

“I’m not going. You two can go ahead.”

“Ah.”

Taniguchi gave a cold smile, while Kunikida nodded his head as though understanding something. Now that pissed me off, yet I could not find a way to argue back. It’s not that I’m afraid I would bump into someone when flirting with other girls, it’s just that……I just think it’s better to be safe.

“It’s OK, Kyon. We understand you’re that sort of person. There’s no need to explain. We’re friends after all, right?”

Taniguchi pretended to make a sigh, Kunikida quickly came and mediated,

“Say, Taniguchi, I don’t think I’ll be flirting with girls as well today. Sorry about that. If you do happen to hook up with one, would you mind introducing her friend to me? We’re friends after all, right?”

After mimicking Taniguchi’s pattern of speech, Kunikida then said,

“Well, see you guys later.”

And he left cooly. I decided to follow Kunikida and leave Taniguchi standing alone with his eyes wide open like an idiot,

“Well, see ya later, Taniguchi. I’ll ask you what your success rate is later this evening, if you’re successful, that is.”

Hmm……where should I go next?

If I go back to the classroom, I’ll probably bump into Haruhi all alone inside. If I walked around the school with that girl, something’s bound to happen that’ll damage my reputation greatly. Once I thought of that, my feet automatically went the opposite direction. I was thinking that if she had kept on handing out flyers at the school entrance dressed in her bunny girl suit, someone should have stopped her by now, and she would be sulking all alone in the classroom. Please, just for today, allow me to have some free time to myself. Tomorrow my mom and sister would be coming to visit, I don’t want them getting caught up with Haruhi’s antics.

I once again examined the festival itinerary, there weren’t many interesting activities around. I wasn’t interested in learning the results for the school’s questionnaire reports or the research on the distribution of local and foreign species of bauhinias. Each grade seems to have made more than two or more movies, I have no intention of watching any one of them. Neither was I interested in study groups discussing what they’ve learned so far at school, or maze houses made out of aluminium foil. Was recruiting members from other schools to form a handball club really a good idea? Only our homeroom teacher Okabe was enthusiastic about it.

“That leaves us with……”

My eyes stopped on the biggest event held during the school festival, the only people practising day and night for this event would only be those guys - I suddenly thought of the annoying trumpet noise that could be heard every night for the past few weeks.

“The concert by the Trumpet Orchestra.”

I took up the itinerary and reconfirmed again, unfortunately, they won’t be playing till tomorrow. There sure were a lot of clubs booking the assembly hall. The Theatre Club and Choir would also perform tomorrow, then what’s on today……

“Live concerts by the Pop Music Society and bands that have registered.”

Now that’s quite common. Though most of the bands would play the most popular songs of the day by various pop singers, it’s not too bad to listen to some live music once in a while. The passion and effort these bands put into their performance far exceeds what I put into the making of the movie by a hundred times. I might as well go compare the results. I could go listen to their music and relax while I daydream, and during this time, I could put this indie movie I personally made at the back of my mind.

“It’s necessary to spend some time alone as well.”

As a result, I had no idea my plan to relax and listen to some music was about to be shattered completely by surprise.

I was too naive, always believing everything in this world has a limit. I keep on forgetting that these limits are there to be ignored and broken eventually by someone. It was because of this that I fell into an infinite whirlpool of chaos that is literally beyond the scope of anyone's comprehension. It was after experiencing one strange event after another that I realized how shallow I was. I must make this a lesson for my descendants to learn from, as for whether my descendants would even pay attention to such a rule, that's not for me to worry about now.

The assembly entrance was wide open, a loud noise boomed from the inside, it was so loud it's as though even the gods were having a concert as well. While this soul rock concert was a bit low in terms of quality, but as long as you pour your heart into it, it doesn't matter much on how good or bad you are, it's just like not adding any flavouring to your Miso soup wouldn't affect it too much. Though it'll taste much better if flavourings were added, but the main dish is the Miso soup itself, not the flavouring. If only flavourings were served, then it won't do the Miso soup any justice.

I looked around the hall, the place looked really small. The steel chairs were only about sixty percent full, the hall was about eighty percent full at the beginning of the concert. The amateur bands on the stage played a number of familiar pop songs, though it's still going to be some time before they make it big, the Broadcast Club's remixing skills were partly responsible for their performance as well.

As all the lights were focused on the stage, the surrounding areas became dark. I found a row full of empty seats and sat by the side.

According to the itinerary, this concert is divided into two parts, one by the Pop Music Society, and the rest by other amateur bands who have registered to perform. Right now it's the students from the Pop Music Society performing. There was a standing area in front of the first row of steel chairs, where some people danced to the rhythm. Based on my deductions, these people are either the performers' families or are being paid to dance around. At any rate, the amplifiers here were just too loud for an audience who wants to daydream.

A while after I placed my hand behind my head, as the last tune was being played, the lead singer begun to introduce his entourage while following the rhythms. I found out that they were the Friendly Five, a second year band from the Pop Music Society. I'll probably forget this information in about three days time.

I don't know music that much to be able to appreciate what it means, and I have no interest in further understanding who the performers are. This was the best occasion to kill time.

I began to relax my nerves.

As a result, when the Friendly Five exited the stage on one side waving their hands at the sporadic applause from the audience, followed by another band entering the stage from the other end……

I started to rub my eyes.

"Wha!?"

The mood in the hall quickly changed. Everyone's mental state slid ten metres down, and the sound effect of them murmuring was now knocking in my head.

"What on earth does that girl think she's doing?"

I was already amazed at seeing her carrying a notestand and microphone onto the stage, yet she has to stand in the limelight with that familiar face and figure, wearing that familiar bunny girl costume.

The bunny ears on her head swung forward and back and she stood on the stage. Even if her eyes were replaced by someone else's, I would still recognize who she is.

Suzumiya Haruhi.

For some reason, Haruhi stood in the center of the stage with a very serious expression.

But, it would have been fine if it was just her alone.

"Ah!?"

That was the sound I made when all the air in my lungs left me at once after noticing the second person who came on a second later.

Sometimes an evil alien magician, sometimes a dark-cloaked fortune teller carrying a crystal ball.

"……"

Speechless, I truly was speechless.

Wearing her black hat and cloak which I was used to seeing these past few weeks, Nagato Yuki walked onto the stage carrying an electric guitar, with the strap over her shoulder. Just what were they up to?

If Asahina-san and Koizumi had followed, I would've breathed a sigh of relief. Yet the third and fourth person were both girls that I've never seen before. Their modest uniform look gave an aura of dignity about them, I guess they must be sempais from the third year. One was carrying a

bass guitar, while the other carried a set of drums onto the stage. There doesn't seem to be any other band members.

Why? The sight of Haruhi and Nagato in her school festival outfit made me want to close my eyes. Why were those two in a Pop Music Society band? And why was Haruhi standing in the most prominent position, carrying a microphone?

As my mind was trying to ponder these questions, the mysterious four-person band looked ready to go. The audience continued their murmuring, while I remained speechless and continued to stare at them. The bassist and drummer nervously started testing out their instruments, Nagato's face was calm as usual, placing her fingers on the guitar strings and standing by.

Next Haruhi put what looked like sheet music onto the notestand and looked around the hall. The seating area was very dark, so I don't think she saw me then. Haruhi tapped the microphone to make sure it was on, then turned to say something to the drummer.

Without any introduction, notification, or even a word from the host, the band began playing as soon as the drummer started the rhythm. Just listening to that prelude alone was enough to make me fall from my seat. Nagato's guitar skills had reached the levels of the likes of Mark Knopfler and Brian May. And they were playing a song I've never heard before. What's this?

What on earth is this?……Just as I was thinking, as if trying to hit me further, Haruhi began singing.

It was a very clear voice, so crisp it could travel all the way to the Moon.

It's just that she was reading the sheet music as she sang along.

For the whole duration of the first song, I never managed to recover from my stunned state. I was probably like one of those RPG monsters being cast with the "Silence" spell.

Haruhi didn't make any body movements, she just stood there and concentrated on singing. I suppose it wasn't easy trying to dance as you read and sing along the notes.

I was still in shock when the first song finished. Normally, it was an occasion for a standing ovation and widespread applause, but right now the audience was as petrified as I was.

Now what? I was already astonished at Haruhi coming up to perform, but I was even more amazed at Nagato's superb skills on the electric guitar. I'm sure the other members from the Pop Music Club had the same questions as I did. As for the other visitors from out of school, they were probably thinking, "Why is the lead singer dressed in a bunny girl suit?"

The hall was as silent as a trench that just suffered a carpet aerial bombing.

We were as silent as sailors who were ensnared by the sound of Siren's singing. When I looked carefully, I noticed the girls playing the bass and drums were also looking at Haruhi and Nagato with the same expression. It wasn't just the audience that was stunned.

Haruhi looked ahead and waited for something, then she knitted her brows and turned around. The drummer frantically began hitting her drums and started playing the second song.

Putting aside the amazement of the audience, the mysterious band was already playing their third song.

Perhaps I'm getting used to it, as my ears begun to appreciate the rhythm and lyrics of the song. This was a fast paced R&B song, this is the first time I've heard it, yet it sounded very pleasant. I thought it was a very good song. Maybe it's due to the amazing skills of the guitarist, as well as Haruhi's impeccable voice……Hmm, how should I say this? Though I was used to hearing her scream and shout, I must admit that she's a very good singer.

The audience also began to recover from their petrified state and turned their attention towards the stage.

I casually turned around and noticed that the number of audience has increased. And I spotted someone I knew as well, who walked towards me, wearing a Danish knight costume.

"Hi there."

Maybe he was afraid his voice would be buried within the loud speakers, he said this into my ear,

"May I please ask what's going on here?"

It was none other than Koizumi.

How the hell should I know? I shouted back, and stared at Koizumi's strange costume. How come you're walking around the school in your school festival costume as well?

"It's too bothersome getting changed all the time, so I decided to just come out wearing this."

And why did you come here?

Koizumi looked gently at the stage where Haruhi was singing, then flicked his hair,

"I heard some rumours."

So it's become a rumour now?

“Yes. To go up the stage and perform in such an outfit, the news is bound to spread. You can’t keep a person’s mouth shut forever.”

The proudest troublemaker of North High, Suzumiya Haruhi, is up to something again……I’ve heard this sort of news spreading around the school many times already. I don’t really mind if that girl added a new case to her X-File folder, but it just wouldn’t be reasonable if my name and the SOS Brigade were involved as well.

“Suzumiya-san sure is amazing, so is Nagato-san.”

Koizumi smiled and closed his eyes as if to enjoy the music. I once again turned towards the stage and observed Haruhi, trying to make out what she was really up to.

Both me and Koizumi had the same opinions about their singing and performance, besides the strange fact that the lead singer had to sing reading from her sheet music from the notestand.

Yet for some reason, I felt moved by something. What was this trembling in my heart about?

As if to change the pace of the performance to make the show more diversified, the next song was a slow melancholic tune. As the fourth song approached its end, I became deeply impressed with its rhythm and lyrics. I haven’t heard such a moving tune for a long time now. I wasn’t alone in thinking like that, the audience around me were also immersed in their enjoyment, there wasn’t even a sound of anyone clearing their throats. Once the fourth song was over, the hall fell into silence once again.

Finally……facing the now fully-seated hall, Haruhi spoke her first sentence,

“Um……Hello everybody.”

Haruhi said with a stiff expression……

“I think it’s time I introduced the members of the band. Actually, I and……”

She pointed to Nagato.

“Yuki and I aren’t members of this band. We’re only stand-ins. The original lead singer and main guitarist was absent due to some unforseen events. Oh, and the lead singer is the main guitarist as well. So there are only three members in this band.”

The audience listened intently.

Haruhi walked around from the notestand and towards the bassist, handing the microphone to her. The girl then looked frantically at Haruhi and asked Haruhi quietly, “Yes?” Before finally introducing herself emotionally.

Haruhi then walked towards the drums and allowed the drummer to introduce herself as well, then quickly returned to the center of the stage.

“These two and the absent leader are the real band members. That’s all, and I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure if I could perform well as a stand-in, but as there was only an hour left before the show started, I just had to give it a try.”

Haruhi shook her head, her bunny ears shook along as well.

“So, if anyone wanted to listen to the real thing being performed by the lead singer and main guitarist, please come and register later. Oh, and we would provide a free copy to anyone who’s brought an audio recorder or MD player with them, right?”

The bassist stiffly nodded her head at Haruhi’s question.

“Right, then it’s decided.”

Haruhi showed her first smile since coming onto stage, so that girl can get nervous sometimes as well. As if finally free from her shackles, she now revealed a bright smile that’s usually seen in the club room - well, not as bright as usual, but the brightness of the smile was at least 50 Watts.

Haruhi turned and smiled at Nagato, who remained expressionless, then screamed towards the microphone at the top of her voice,

“And now, the final song!”

It was later on that I found out from Haruhi herself.

“After I was done giving out the flyers at the school entrance, and on my way back towards the classroom……”

Haruhi said,

“I found someone arguing by the shoe lockers. Yes, it was the members of that band arguing with the people from the Student Council’s School Festival Executive Committee. I felt a bit curious, so I decided hear what they were fighting about.”

Wearing your bunny girl costume?

“What I was wearing then isn’t important. After hearing what was being argued, I found out that the Executive Committee wasn’t allowing the band to perform.”

They didn’t have to make a ruckus by the shoe lockers of all places.

“That was because of the band the three sempais from the Pop Music Society formed, their leader, who was the lead singer and main guitarist, suddenly fell into a fever. I hear she’s suffering from tonsillitis, she could hardly speak, and she looked exhausted as she struggled to stand.”

She sure was unlucky.

“Exactly. Not to mention she accidentally tripped and twisted her right wrist at home. It was impossible for her to perform.”

If it was impossible, why did she come to school then?

“Um, she cried and begged to be allowed on the stage. But she looked as though she would faint if she didn’t receive any medical treatment soon, so the Executive Committee people carried her……like this, and dragged her away as though carrying a little green man. Both sides pulled and pushed, and eventually came to the shoe lockers.”

But, how was that lead singer and guitarist going to perform when she was sick and injured at the same time?

“By sheer determination.”

I actually believe only you could do that if it was just you.

“They worked so hard for this day! It wasn’t much if your own efforts went down the drain, but you can’t just throw away the efforts of your companions as well. I really hate seeing such situations.”

You sounded as though you’ve worked hard yourself.

“And the songs as well. They weren’t going to play some half-assed pop song, but an original song with the tune composed and lyrics written all by themselves! Of course they wanted to perform at all costs. If the song could speak, it would probably shout, ‘Play me! Play me now!’”

So you decided to roll up your sleeves and help them out?

“My costume didn’t have any sleeves then. The guys from the School Festival Executive Committee in this school are all imbecile yes-men appointed by the teachers, there’s no way one can listen to whatever they say. But……though I may be at loggerheads with the Student Council, when I saw the band leader looking so terrible, even I thought she couldn’t make it. And so I said, ‘Why not let me take over for you?’”

And that leader, bassist and and drummer actually agreed?

“If it was just the singing, it wasn’t too hard. The sick band leader stared at me for a while, then said, ‘Alright. If it’s you, then you can do it.’ She then gave me a gentle smile while looking very tired.”

Everybody in North High now knows who Haruhi is and what she looks like. They probably have guessed what sort of girl she is as well.

“I didn’t think much, after I pushed her into the teacher’s car as she was driven off to the ambulance, I then concentrated on memorizing the tunes and lyrics from listening to the demo tapes and reading the sheet music, since we only had one hour left.”

Then, what about Nagato?

“Um, it’s not that much of a problem for me to play the guitar as well, but we already had no time as I was already busy memorizing the rhythms. So I decided to ask Yuki to help out on the guitar part. Do you know? That girl’s good at everything!”

Of course I know that, better than you in fact.

“When I found her, she was busy telling the fortunes of her customers. When I explained everything to her, she agreed to help right away. I’m so amazed that she can memorize the notes instantly after reading it just once, and then play them all out so accurately. I wonder where Yuki learnt her guitar skills from.”

She probably only started learning the moment you came asking her to help out.

On the following Monday, two days after that incident.

It was on the first Monday after the school festival, during the recess before the fourth session.

Haruhi sat behind me, happily writing something on her notebook. I don’t want to know what it was, but I could pretty much guess the details. Haruhi was pleased that the SOS Brigade’s first indie movie did surprisingly well, and already she was busy conceptualizing on its sequel. Just thinking of how to banish these thoughts from Haruhi’s mind was already tiring enough for me.

“Someone’s here!”

Kunikida said after returning from the bathroom,

“They’re looking for Suzumiya-san.”

Haruhi lifted her head, Kunikida then pointed towards the door. Finishing his role as the messenger, he hurriedly returned to his seat.

Outside the open sliding doors stood three solemn looking girls. One of them wore a sling over one of her shoulders. I remembered seeing the other two……they were the band members from last time.

“Haruhi.”

I pointed to the door with my chin.

“They seem to be looking for you.”

“Um.”

Surprisingly, Haruhi looked hesitant. She slowly stood up, but had no intention of moving. In the end she even said,

“Kyon, come with me.”

Why should I have to go with you? I never had a chance to argue, as Haruhi pulled me by my collar with her incredible strength towards the classroom door. The three sempais instantly giggled at the sight of this.

Haruhi then forcefully had me stand beside her.

“Has your tonsillitis got any better?”

She said to the third year girl that I only met for the first time.

“Yes, it’s much better now.”

She gently caressed her throat and said in a weak voice,

“We’re forever indebted to you, Suzumiya-san.”

She then bowed deeply to Haruhi. Her band members did the same as well.

I later found out from them that the whole school (especially the girls) have rushed to the Pop Music Society and requested copies of the original demo recordings. Right now they’re visiting every class distributing the MD copies.

“There were so many orders that it’s amazing.”

When I heard how many orders were made, I was amazed as well. Because people weren’t ordering the version which Haruhi and Nagato stood-in, but the original version instead. It was an unexpected ripple effect.

“This is really all thanks to you.”

The three of them all gave the same graceful smile to their helpful lower classman.

“As a result of that, all our hard work didn’t go to waste. We’re so grateful of your help. Suzumiya-san, you truly are amazing. This year’s school festival was our last chance of performing for the Pop Music Society, I would have performed myself if it were possible, but it was better to find a stand-in than to give up completely. We are simply eternally grateful for your generosity.”

It was embarassing enough to be thanked so sincerely by three sempais, even though I wasn’t the one being thanked. Why should I stand with Haruhi and be embarassed together with her?

“We’d like to offer you a gift as a token of our gratitude.”

When the band leader said that, Haruhi quickly shook her hands.

“There’s no need for that, no, really. I had a fun time singing, the songs were really pleasant. It’s like having a karaoke but with free live band playing for you instead. So I’ll feel bad if I accept any gifts from you.”

I felt Haruhi sounded strange. As though she had prepared this speech beforehand. Although talking to her sempais so casually sure suited her image well.

“There’s no need to be too concerned about it. If you want to thank someone, go thank Yuki. She was the one that I had to turn to for help.”

The three of them all said they’ve already gone to Nagato-san’s class to thank her.

After expressing their gratitude, Nagato simply nodded without changing her expression and then silently pointed towards Haruhi’s classroom. That wasn’t too hard to visualize.

“Well then……”

The leader sempai finally said,

“We plan to hold another concert just before our graduation, so feel free to come along, and……”

She looked at me carefully.

“Don’t forget to bring your friend along.”

But, how was it that their original recorded version became so popular in demand?

The answer was later solved by someone. It's only during this time that this chatterbox would come to explain in detail the answer to this minor mystery. Sometimes this esper-boy can be useful as well.

"Have you noticed any difference between Suzumiya-san's voice with the rest of the rhythm sections? Or to be more precise, the difference between the rhythm sections of Suzumiya-san's melody, Nagato-san's guitar riff and that of the bass and drums."

Koizumi continued,

"The difference was so small it was near impossible to notice. Their jamming was so perfect no one would have thought they were a temporary band. Suzumiya-san sure has an amazing sense of rhythm, she only needed to listen to the original tape three times before going on to perform."

Nagato too was pretty amazing, with her guitar skills reaching professional levels. But for our ever reliable goddess Nagato, that sort of trick was easy for her.

"However, that sort of singing wasn't exactly perfect. After all, those were all original composed songs. The musical foundation over the songs of the band members, who had practiced day and night over their own created songs, and that of Haruhi, who only came on after listening to the tape three times, were drastically different."

That was pretty obvious.

"Exactly. In other words, no matter how hard the bassist and drummer try to match up with the singing of Suzumiya-san, who had hastily memorized the rhythms and made her own interpretations, and the guitar riffs of Nagato-san, who would be trying to follow the singing rhythms, there would still be some discrepancies between their various rhythm sections. The audience would feel some sort of disharmony within the song, yet they don't know where the disharmony comes from, since that was based on a subconscious feeling."

He's always like that, explaining things as though they really mean something. Must you explain everything from a psychological point of view?

"This is based on my analysis, you'll understand once I finish my explanation. As the second song and third song followed, that disharmonious feeling within the audience grew larger and larger without them realizing it, until the final song was played……Think about it, what did Suzumiya-san do before performing the last song?"

She explained to the audience that the lead singer as well as main guitarist was absent, and she had to stand-in together with Nagato. She then stuffed the microphone to the band members for them to introduce themselves. That was it.

"And that was enough. The mystery was answered, and the doubts of the audience were all cleared at once. 'Ah~. So that's why we had that strange feeling of disharmony.'……and all their questions were answered."

Since you say that, I guess I have to agree. Yet I still wasn't convinced.

"Suzumiya-san's singing and Nagato-san's guitar skills were far above the levels a high school Pop Music Society could reach. The audience would probably think, 'If the stand-in artists was already this great, then wouldn't the original members be superb?'"

So that's why many people requested MD copied of their original recordings?

"Suzumiya-san's singing is so good that it's close to perfection. Yet her near perfect performance has created something good out of it, Suzumiya-san sure is incredible."

Maybe. For those three third-year band members, Haruhi was like a saviour.

But……what was she to us?

"To us? What do you mean?"

I mean what was Haruhi to the members of the SOS Brigade, the constant victims of Haruhi's ideas! Don't tell me you expect her to create "something good" from her ideas.

"Then I wouldn't know the answer. These things are best left till the end to find out. Yes, if till the very end, we still feel it wasn't a bad thing to have met her, then it's probably a blessing."

The three third-year sempais left just as the bell for the end of the fourth session began to ring.

Haruhi returned to her seat with an expression that was complex and hard to describe. She spent the whole fourth session daydreaming and carrying the same expression. When lunch break came, she disappeared at once.

I spent the lunch break sitting with Kunikida and listening to Taniguchi making his excuses, "It's true. There were no hot girls at all during the school festival, I think this has to do with our school's geographic position. As the school is situated on a hill, the romantic path becomes an uphill struggle as well." I think I let that babble enter my left ear and out of my right, as I was too busy eating. I finished my boxed lunch in no time and got off my seat.

For no reason at all, I suddenly felt like having a walk after lunch.

After walking aimlessly for a while, for some reason my legs automatically turned to the central courtyard, and towards the patchy grass fields just beside the corridor leading to the club room building, and it was there I saw Haruhi lying on the grassy knoll.

Placing her hand behind her back as a pillow, she seemed concentrated on the movement of the clouds above.

“Yo.”

I said,

“What’s with you? You’ve had that face since the last recess.”

“What now?”

Haruhi gave me an incomprehensible reply, and continued looking at the clouds. I decided to follow suit and silently looked at the sky.

I don’t know how long we kept silent for. I don’t suppose it was more than three minutes, but I don’t have much confidence with my internal clock anyway.

At the end of this meaningless silent marathon, Haruhi finally spoke. She sounded very stiff, as if struggling to find a topic to talk about.

“Um……I just can’t remain calm, I wonder why?”

Hearing Haruhi’s tone I could tell she was troubled, I half-smiled,

“How should I know?”

It’s because you’re not used to being thanked by other people, and especially to being thanked personally by someone you’ve never met before. And you never have done anything others would say “thank-you” for face-to-face. You’re probably wondering whether you were being intrusive when you decided to help them. After all, if it had been you, even if your vocal cords and arms were broken, you would probably had dragged yourself onto the stage with your sheer determination, no matter how people tried to talk you out of it. Never once would you have thought of getting anyone to help.

In the end, you not only saved the day, but you managed to raise the popularity of the sempais’ band, all thanks to your effort in standing up against the Executive Committee. Their gratitude was genuine and came from the bottom of their hearts. So the decision you made was probably the second best, if not the best, choice. How does it feel, Haruhi? Now you know the importance of helping people in need. Why don’t you make an oath to help others for the rest of your life?

……I never said any of the above to Haruhi, only keeping it in my mind. Since all I was doing was standing besides Haruhi and looking at the sky. Since the school festival ended, the autumn season really kicked into gear, and the mountain breeze began chasing away the thin clouds.

Haruhi remained silent as well. Her scowling face was probably deliberate just to spite me. She must be having another expression inside her mind.

“Well?”

Laying flat on the grass, Haruhi turned her sharp gaze towards me,

“You have something to say? Hurry up and say it! Though it’s probably some unimportant nonsense, but you’ll go crazy eventually if you keep things to yourself for too long.”

“No, nothing really.” I said.

Haruhi sat up and clutched the grass on the knoll with her hands, she gathered them up and threw them towards me. But it seemed even the weather gods were on my side, as a wind suddenly came and blew the green grass straight into Haruhi’s face.

“Damn it!”

After spitting out all the grass that flew into her mouth, she lay flat again.

I lifted my head and looked towards the club building, I could see the Literature Club’s window. I thought I would see a slim short haired figure looking down at us, but in the end I could see nothing. It was normal for me not to see anything anyway.

After another moment’s of silence, a voice began to talk to herself,

“It didn’t feel bad at all singing live. Though for a moment I was concerned with how well I could sing……but it was fun. How should I say this? I felt very immersed with it.”

If dressing up in a bunny girl costume and singing from the notes as a stand-in singer makes you happy, then it means you have an unlimited amount of enthusiasm, though I knew that for a long time already.

“And it was because it was so much fun that the injured sempai had to argue with the Executive Committee to allow her on the stage.”

“Yeah.”

Hearing this heart-felt confession, I felt moved somehow. This girl never fails to amaze me.

“Hey!”

Remaining solemn all the time until now, Haruhi suddenly leaped forward and stood near my face. I instinctively backed off, but mistimed my step. And right now this ever moody drama queen now showed a deluxe smile and raised her voice,

“Kyon, what instrument can you play?”

A particularly ominous feeling swiftly crept into my consciousness, I quickly shook my head.

“I don’t know any.”

“Let’s form a band for the school festival next year. Even if we don’t join the Pop Music Society, we can still go on stage to perform after passing the audition. We’ll get through with ease. I’ll do the singing, Yuki’s the guitarist, while Mikuru-chan can shake the tambourine and make the stage lively. Good idea, huh?”

No, it’s not a good idea!

“Of course, we must work on the sequel to the movie as well. Yup! We’ll be quite busy next year. We ought to have more goals for the new year than previous years!”

Now just wait a moment.

“Let’s go, Kyon.”

Wait, hold it. Where’re we going? And what’re we doing?

“To get some instruments! We’ll probably find something good if we go to the Pop Music Society’s place, besides I want to ask that third-year band tips on how to compose a song. Good things ought to be done quickly!”

It may be a good thing for you, but not for me! But Haruhi ignored my doubts and grabbed my hand, she then began to drag me along……

In very large strides.

“Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of the music and lyrics. Of course, I’ll be in charge of the editing and dance choreography as well!”

Sigh. The secret switch that only exists in Haruhi’s has been switched on and was generating strange ideas once again. Even if I was abducted by aliens, I still wouldn’t be dragged so strongly as this. I looked up again for someone who could save me.

There was still no sign of anyone by the club room window. The guitar maestro and alien magician was probably deeply immersed in her world of books right now, since autumn was the season for reading, after all.

“Can’t you walk with your own legs? C’mon, let’s leap through every three steps and we’ll climb the stairs in no time!”

Haruhi turned, her eyes glittering with all sorts of entertaining stuff, she hastened her footsteps and soon began running.

I had no choice but to run along as well.

Why you ask?

Because it was still some time before Haruhi could let go of my hand.

Asahina Mikuru's Adventure Episode 00

And so, my first school festival in high school has ended frantically together with the seasonal change, yet the lively atmosphere of the festival still echoed inside Haruhi's mind, and behind that echo were all sorts of promotional posters that read, "Book your pre-order tickets now", "This movie will rock Hollywood (very soon)", "One year to conceive, and (less than) one month to complete shooting".

Anyway, she was already in the process of making the second movie, scheduled to be shown at the next school festival. There's a limit for impatience, you know.

She should consider my feelings as well. I just barely managed to carry all those heavy equipment to their destination, and was about to finally go home and get some rest, and yet there were even more goods for me to carry. Right now I feel like escorting a female protagonist home on a path full of predators, always having to worry when a Bengal tiger would strike at us. This is all thanks to the movie which was shown not long ago, as it was simply too overwhelming.

As for how overwhelming it was, you'll just have to read on……

Her name is Asahina Mikuru. At first glance, she seems like a normal, healthy and cute young girl, yet she is really a time traveler from the future. If you happen to know someone called "Asahina Mikuru" somewhere else, that's simply a coincidence, just wanted to let you know.

Anyway, Asahina Mikuru's true identity is a battle waitress from the future. Why does the waitress have to come from the future? And why did she have to dress up as a waitress? Asking such insignificant questions is meaningless, all I can say is, that's how the story is set. In fact, not a single character here has a valid raison d'etre.

……This is all decided by someone from somewhere high up above.

For now, let us secretly observe this Asahina Mikuru.

Normally she would dress up as a bunny girl, since this happens to be part of Mikuru's daily life, which involves attracting customers to visit the local shopping street. Every night, she would change into her bunny girl costume, and carry a large plastic placard in front of the stores and advertise for them with her shy voice. In other words, this is what normal people would call a job.

As she came all the way from the future, she ought to be able to make money more efficiently, but since this story is created without any consideration for those matters, I might as well let everyone know about this before you get your hopes up too early.

This means that this battle waitress from the future would normally dress up as a bunny girl.

Before anyone asks if there's a meaning in dressing like that, I'd also like to inform you that you'll probably never find out the answer till the end. In other words, it is meaningless. Even if there is a meaning, it is most likely the mystery would never be solved. If it can't be solved, it's pretty much meaningless as well. It makes no difference whatsoever.

Today Asahina Mikuru was again dressed in her hot bunny girl costume and waving a plastic placard in front of the stores, and helping the owners make ends meet.

"Everyone please stop by! We have new supplies of fresh cabbage for today! And there's a limited sale! For the next hour, each cabbage will be at half price! The lady over there, don't delay!"

Mikuru can be seen shouting with a stiff voice while standing in front of the grocery. The bunny ears on her head aren't the only things swinging from her tiny figure, but something else on her body. Most of the grocery customers are middle-aged housewives, so no one was sure how getting a cute girl to advertise can be effective. Yet the sight of Mikuru sincerely working hard to advertise has already moved thousands of hearts, and everyone who passes by the grocery would smile pleasantly, and naturally they wouldn't mind parting with their money.

"Mikuru-chan, you're energetic today as well,"

This deadpan dialogue was read out by a bystander, as Mikuru revealed her bright red sunflower smile,

"Thank you! I'll do my best!"

The cosplay girl who worked too hard replied and continued to spread her innocent charm at the shopping street.

She has the magical ability to alter a customer's menu for tonight's dinner from a simple cabbage into a vegetable hot pot! This is coupled with this amazing sentence,

"Hurry up and get them while stocks last!"

The grocery immediately became packed with people. In a short while, all the discounted cabbages were sold.

Mikuru was then summoned by the grocery owner, Morimuri Kiyosumi-san (age 46), who gave her an envelope with her salary in it,

"You've always come to help us out. This isn't much, but please take it,"

Mikuru received the envelope from Morimura-san's hands, which were weathered by many years of blood and sweat, and said,

“Don’t mention it. You’re being too generous, I’m always being looked after by you, since this is all that I can do……”

Mikuru bowed and thanked him, she’s a very humble girl ever since the beginning. She stuffed the envelope into her very low décolletage and said,

“I’ve got to help out the butcher’s next, so please excuse me. See you later!”

Mikuru carried her plastic placard and ran along the shopping street. She has now become the irreplaceable mascot of this shopping street and is very popular with the residents here.

Best of luck, Mikuru. Pull back all the customers who have been snatched away by the Wal-Mart a few blocks away since it opened last year. The fate of the local community and the small personal shops all rest on your shoulders.

……One is tempted to recite the above paragraph when looking at her back.

However, Mikuru didn’t travel back in time from the future in order to rescue a local shopping street in decline. Her bunny girl appearance was simply a cover identity, because remember, she’s a battle waitress. Actually there’s not much difference whether she’s dressed as a bunny girl or as a waitress, but that’s how the story is set.

This is because the story is the product of someone’s instantaneous random thoughts, and as a result, the plot lacks any planning whatsoever.

So, Mikuru’s real purpose, her true mission, was to secretly protect a young man.

This young man is called Koizumi Itsuki. At first glance he looks like a high school student you would find anywhere, but he is actually an esper. If you happen to bump into someone who is also called “Koizumi Itsuki,” I’m sure everyone would have guessed by now without me explaining, that this is just a coincidence.

Even though he’s an esper, Koizumi Itsuki wasn’t aware of this himself. It was only by chance that the supernatural powers hidden within him were awakened. Just to be safe, he is currently living the life of a high school student, a life that from a subjective and objective perspective can be defined as normal.

Today, Koizumi Itsuki carried his bag and the usual casual smile on his face as he walked home from school. He would always pass through this shopping street every day on the way to and from school.

“……”

Itsuki was secretly being observed by someone standing in the shadows. From this person's long bunny ears and near-naked costume, it is not hard to guess that this is none other than Mikuru. Normally one wouldn't wear such clothes that would stand out when stalking, but as this was her regular attire, she didn't have much choice.

"Phew,"

Mikuru sighed deeply. She seems to be relieved that Itsuki seems to be safe for now. She also resembles a kouhai sighing at herself for not having the courage to say hi to the sempai she admires. Just thinking about this is enough to piss me off, so I decided to ignore the latter possibility.

After seeing Itsuki walk away, Mikuru used a felt-tip pen and wrote on her plastic placard, "100 grams of brisket for only 98 yen (with heart-shaped symbols and cute cow illustrations.)" She then looked a bit dejected as she walked in the opposite direction away from Itsuki.

After nodding her head to everyone's greetings along the way, Mikuru arrived in front of the dimly lit stationery store. The owner of this store, Suzuki Yuusuke-san (age 65), is the president of this shopping district council, he is also the person who provided Mikuru with her current lodgings.

"Welcome back, Mikuru-chan. Was the work hard today?"

Suzuki-san spoke in a formal tone as he smiled gently like a kind grandfather while greeting Mikuru.

"Um…… Not at all. There were a lot of customers today…… Um, it's prosperous, I think that's how you would describe it."

"Good, very good."

After nodding and thanking Suzuki-san, Mikuru walked up the slightly steep stairs. Passing a narrow corridor, she entered a small Japanese-style bedroom, Mikuru's current lodging in this time period.

As Suzuki-san himself lived elsewhere, this room was originally unoccupied, I'm not too sure about the details; but anyway, this is where the time-traveler Mikuru currently lives.

After closing the door, Mikuru began to slowly take off her bunny girl costume. Sadly, this very seductive scene was cut. The next scene shows her crawling into her bed, wearing a very loose T-shirt, and that was the end of that scene.

On the other hand, there was someone else observing Koizumi Itsuki with what can only be described as thoughtful eyes.

That person is Nagato Yuki. While she looks like an extraordinary and exceptional girl, in reality she is an evil alien magician. This can be figured out by the odd costume she's wearing, a wide-rimmed pointy hat with a large cape over her shoulders. By the way, if you happen to know someone called "Nagato Yuki," that's just a coincidence…… I'm sure you're all sick and tired of hearing that already.

"……"

Carrying a poker face without any emotions in it, Yuki stood on the roof of a high school building. This high school is the one Itsuki attends, and judging from the scene, this Yuki seems to be planning something for Itsuki; yet judging from the time this scene was shot, Itsuki has already gone home. In other words, Yuki is standing on the school's rooftop when Itsuki is no longer at school. Now that's a very awkward cut-in scene.

A while ago in the shopping district, one could tell it was near sunset, yet right now the sun was above Yuki's head, and the rays are now much stronger. No matter how one tries to hide it, it's not hard to figure out that this scene was filmed during lunch break. This shows how much of a headache the director gives to the editing team when she disregards the continuity of the scenes.

This also applies to all the upcoming scenes as well.

As we're running short on time, we now skip to the first battle between Mikuru and Yuki without any explanation whatsoever.

For some reason the battle takes place at the forest park. After a meaningless scene of Mikuru running through among the flying pigeons, we now come straight to this battle.

Right now she's no longer wearing her bunny girl costume, but rather her waitress costume, the mini-skirt of which is simply too short. Mikuru, whose charm increased tenfold by tying her hair into two ponytails, now carries a rather heavy automatic pistol. In a way, she revealed a sad expression like that of a martyr who is prepared to sacrifice her life. This expression wasn't made under the director's instructions, but was in fact showing the lead actress's genuine feelings.

On the other hand, Nagato Yuki, cloaked all in black, seemed oblivious to what was going on. She simply stood there and held a magic wand with a star in her hand.

The two girls now stared back and forth at each other in what is supposed to be a face-off. Mikuru doesn't seem comfortable with this, perhaps thinking that she wouldn't stand a chance in such a battle?

"Ahh!"

Mikuru shut her eyes tight and waved her gun blindly as she pulled the trigger. The bullets now flew out of the gun and towards Yuki's direction. Yet most of them didn't even hit their intended target, and whizzed past Yuki. One could count the number of bullets reached to the target with all five fingers.

Obviously Yuki was not going to stand there and become a bullseye, she slowly waved her "Star Ring Inferno," her ridiculously-named wand, and swiftly swept the bullets onto the ground.

"Sob……"

Very quickly, all the bullets have been fired. Silence fell once again on the battlefield,

"V, very well! I'll just have to use my secret attack! Take this……"

It seems rather early to be using her secret attack already. We now see Mikuru yell cutely as she threw away her gun and widened her beautiful eyes.

Her blue left eye was widely opened as she placed a V-shape finger gesture over her face,

"Mi, Mi, Mikuru Beam!"

One yell and one blink later, a deadly laser would be fired from that eye of hers. The fatal laser would travel at the speed of light and slice through everything that it touches - that's supposed to be the case, but someone wasn't going to allow Mikuru to succeed.

That person was none other than Nagato Yuki.

Without any special effects used during filming, Yuki had moved instantaneously, and blocked the Mikuru Beam with her right hand. Before the laser could even make a hissing slicing sound, Yuki had already arrived in front of Mikuru.

"Kyaa!?"

Mikuru was startled at the shadow suddenly looming quickly towards her. Yuki moved in such speed that the sight of her figure has become blurry. She easily grabbed hold of Mikuru's face and pressed her to the ground,

"Ah…… Na, Nagato-san……!"

The black cloaked Nagato was now sitting on a terrified waitress.

What will happen from now on? What fate awaits Mikuru? And when will Itsuki be able make his appearance by chance?

電器店
…

All these questions will be answered eventually after these messages for Oomori Electronics, announced by none other than our two female protagonists.

……

Welcome back, the movie now resumes with Mikuru the waitress walking aimlessly along the street.

“I can’t believe the Mikuru Beam didn’t work at all…… I must think of something else,”

Mikuru talked to herself as she walked along the shopping street. Looking tired, she dragged herself back to the stationery store and into her room, which doesn’t even have a single decent piece of furniture in sight, and began to change again. After all, she isn’t a Power Ranger; she would have to take off the clothes she’s wearing if she is to transform.

When the door reopened, Mikuru once again reappeared in her bunny girl costume, then walked down the stairs looking depressed.

Looks like she still has to work today, regardless of the outcome of the battle. I wonder if she’s serious or dense, or just really passionate about her work? The protagonist of this movie is sure going through a lot of tough times, which is kind of similar to Mikuru’s own experience when she made this movie.

At this moment, Koizumi Itsuki, as usual, was walking along the road with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Ahead of him stood the mysterious dark-cloaked figure - Nagato Yuki. This time a cat can be seen sticking out his paws and clinging to Yuki’s shoulder. It looks as though the cat is trying to keep his balance more so than Yuki. As Yuki was already good at concealing her presence, it came very suddenly when she appeared and blocked Itsuki’s path.

Making a startled expression, Itsuki stopped in front of the magician with a cat.

“Who art thou?”

Any simple line was far better than this, but that’s what was written on the script, so there was no other choice.

“I am……”

Yuki paused for a moment, then said,

“A magic-wielding alien.”

Itsuki stared at the cat and responded,

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

Yuki also stared at the cat.

“So how may I help you?”

“You have a hidden power that I want.”

“And what if I refuse your request?”

“I must obtain it, even if it means using extreme means.”

“What do you mean by extreme means?”

“Like this.”

Yuki waved her “Star Ring Inferno,” from which the star-shaped symbol fired a piercing laser as fast as lightning.

“Look out!”

A bunny girl leapt out from the side and grabbed hold of Itsuki, and then they both fell towards the ground. The lightning-fast beam missed its target and disappeared after hitting the electric post.

The sight of Mikuru’s slim figure being hugged is enough to infuriate. For some reason, Yuki did not continue her attack.

Mikuru was now seeing stars as she smacked her head when falling to the ground. Only when Itsuki shook her shoulders did she wave the stars away.

“Ouch……”

Rubbing her head, Mikuru stood up, then defiantly pointed towards Yuki and said,

“I won’t let you have your way……”

Yuki looked straight at Mikuru, then glanced expressionlessly towards the whiskers of the cat sitting on her shoulder, and then returned her gaze towards Mikuru again and said,

“I will retreat for now. You won’t be so lucky next time. Before then, try to think of what to write on your tombstone, for I will show no mercy next time, and will definitely annihilate you.”

I don't understand why she wants to give Mikuru some breathing space. Anyway, after saying that, Yuki's tiny figure slowly walked away.

Itsuki now spoke,

"May I ask who are you?"

"Eh?"

Mikuru, who just managed to breath a sigh of relief, now looked tense again,

"Ah, um…… I'm just a bunny girl passing by! That's all! G, good bye!"

She then ran away as though running after Yuki.

"Just who is she……"

Itsuki looked pointlessly far off into the distance, and the camera also panned up pointlessly towards the white clouds which signals the end of this scene.

The second battle between Mikuru and Yuki takes place by a pond.

As you all know by now, there is no explanation for how we have come to this battle already. You can use your own imagination to figure out that a lot must have happened…… I think.

"I'm not going to back away because of this! Y, you evil alien Yuki. Hurry up and leave Earth……! You…… Um….."

"You are the one that should disappear from this time period. He is ours. That is how valuable he is. Though he has yet to discover that he possesses such precious powers. We will need his powers in order to invade Earth."

"I, I, I won't let you have your way, even if it means losing my life."

"In that case, die!"

This time Yuki didn't bring her cat, but instead brought three people who seem to be high school students. Of these three people, there was an energetic girl and two confused-looking young men.

It seems that the long-haired girl is an acquaintance of Mikuru's.

“Ah, ah, Tsuruya-san…… E, even you have…… Please come to your senses!”

“Mikuru, you have no right to ask me to come to my senses dressed like that!”

This “Tsuruya-san” showed her true self for an instant and intentionally twitched her mouth,

“Mikuru, I’m sorry. I don’t want to do this, but I can’t control myself. I’m really sorry.”

“Kya?”

“Come, Mikuru, prepare to die~”

Tsuruya-san, whose acting was superb, now slowly approached Mikuru with the other two people.

Yuki stayed behind and commanded the situation by waving her wand. Some sort of unknown psychic waves must have been emitted from that magic wand of hers, turning Tsuruya-san and the other two into Nagato’s personal zombies.

The terrifying Yuki has actually using such a devious method so that there’s no way for Mikuru to fight back. What will Mikuru do?

“Waaaaaa, waaaaa~!”

Looks like there was nothing she can do.

Poor Mikuru now has her arms and legs carried by Tsuruya-san and the other two, who then toss her into the green murky pond. Somehow, one of the two male zombies, the goofy looking one, also fell into the pond as well. Don’t worry about him, he’ll climb out by himself anyway.

“Ah, help…… Waa……!”

The pond looked very deep indeed. Mikuru was now in a state of panic, and was beating the water frantically, which also meant she was hardly moving away from her spot at all. At this rate she will sink to the bottom of the pond and become food for the fish. Mikuru couldn’t swim…… Or rather the story says she couldn’t swim, so all she could do was splash frantically on the water, creating lots of white foam. Mikuru is now in great danger.

On the other hand, this is also a great opportunity to give the female protagonist a helping hand.

“You okay?”

Coming in calmly was Koizumi Itsuki. He knelt down by the pond side, and like a main character from a comic book, reached his hand out to Mikuru who was close to drowning.

“Hold my hand tightly. Calm down. Make sure you don’t pull me in as well.”

Here comes the question. Just where on Earth did Itsuki come from? The pond has few places to hide nearby. Judging by how long it takes for him to reach Mikuru after she fell in, he must have been watching all this from the sidelines. What's even more incredible was that Yuki, who up till now was still waving her wand, had now vanished without a trace along with her three henchmen. This was a great chance to finish off Mikuru. Just where the hell did they all go?

"……Brr…… Cold……"

After being rescued by Itsuki, Mikuru coughed non-stop and crawled onto shore slowly.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

Itsuki asked, but Mikuru didn't answer. She only stared blankly at him, and then after a while she finally spoke,

"What was I doing? ……Well…… I got thrown into the pond by some bad people…… Ugh……"

At this moment, a sound came from afar, followed by Mikuru moaning and fainting at once. Yup, according to the script, she's supposed to faint by now.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Lying on Itsuki's shoulder, Mikuru's figure slowly slumped to the ground.

Usually, when guys like Itsuki face such a situation, they would usually call an ambulance or call someone nearby for help. Yet Itsuki went against convention and picked up Mikuru. *You bastard! Just where do you think you're taking an unconscious cute girl to?* Even if you tried to scream at him like that, Itsuki still slowly walked away looking determined.

So determined, as though he was being controlled by psychic waves, he carried Mikuru away from the scene.

He then took her to a place.

That place is none other than where he lives.

The director may have omitted a lot of detailed filming, but it's not hard to guess that Itsuki's house must be very enormous, which can be observed from him carrying Mikuru into his very spacious Japanese-style room.

Besides the fact that Itsuki has committed the unspeakable sin of carrying Mikuru in his arms, another thing of note is that Mikuru seems to have just taken a bath and is now looking very captivating.

Yet it's very hard to imagine how an unconscious person can take a bath all by herself. This also means that besides having her body molested by the hands of this grinning hypocrite, there's no guarantee that nothing else has happened to her. Before these questions even have a chance of getting processed by the brain, one would already be consumed by wrath, which would in turn manifest itself into a murderous intent. Kind of like how I'm feeling right now.

Instead of being concerned about being ambushed by Yuki, Itsuki ought to worry more about how half the school is going to go after his life.

It's already criminal enough to bring a girl, who has been stunned senseless after nearly drowning, to his own room while she's still unconscious. To give her a bath would be beyond criminal, it would be a crime of the most primitive nature. The person who did this…… No, the bastard Itsuki who did such a despicable act ought to be sliced into many pieces alive, and his family would get no compensation for that either. It's his fault for actually doing what every guy in the school wants to do instead.

Itsuki now placed Mikuru on a mattress which wasn't there before, and then knelt beside her. He crossed his arms and went into deep thought. Wanna bet? I bet that his mind is probably very empty right now.

Seeing how he has obediently followed orders from afar, he now moved closer to Mikuru's face. If he dares move one centimeter closer, then someone who isn't supposed to appear in the movie would break the fourth wall and beat the crap out of Koizumi…… I mean the guy who plays Itsuki. Fortunately, he was stopped by someone whose appearance in this scene isn't that surprising.

"Hold it,"

Sticking her head in the window, and looking like a grim-reaper girl in training, is none other than Nagato Yuki. I forgot to mention this is the second floor so no one knows where she was standing by before she entered this scene, and please do try to continue and suspend your disbelief.

Yuki, who would be more appropriately called an angel in funeral garb than a grim reaper, lept through the window and quickly stood up again.

"Koizumi Itsuki, you shouldn't choose her. Only by joining with me can you fulfill your power's potential,"

Yuki said plainly while staring at Itsuki with her dark eyes which remain calm for 24 hours a day.

Itsuki's acting is honestly crap. He didn't look panicked at all when he found out that Yuki had appeared suddenly through the window. When it was his turn to speak -

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Only then did he raise the pitch of his voice and make a serious face.

“I cannot explain right now, but one day you will understand. You have two choices: You can choose me and advance this universe towards its true form, or choose her and pluck out the possibilities of the future.”

If I remember correctly, 30% of this line by Yuki was made up on the spot. Is that sentence directed to Itsuki’s real identity?

As for the true meaning of Nagato’s…… Sorry, Yuki’s words, we’ll leave that till later. Itsuki now looked troubled and went into contemplation,

“I see. No matter which path he chooses…… No wait, right now that would be me in this scene. The key is with me, right? Come to think of it, there’s not much a key can do besides opening the door. If that door opens, something would happen, right? I’m afraid if something does happen……”

Itsuki paused for a while, and for some reason he looked at the camera with very thoughtful eyes. Just who the hell is he speaking to?

“I understand now, Yuki-san. Right now I don’t have the right to decide yet. It’s still too early to come to any conclusions now. Can we leave this decision till later? We still need time to think about it. Of course if you’re willing to tell us everything, then that’s a different story.”

“It won’t be far off before we do that, but I am certain it is not now. We are used to viewing insufficient data as defects. We will not make any move if we are not absolutely sure of it.”

Such an enigmatic conversation. There seems to be a bond of understanding between Itsuki and Yuki which no one else can comprehend.

Yuki nodded slowly, then looked at the pink faced Mikuru sleeping soundly. She then climbed out of the window and disappeared at once. She didn’t exactly jump off from the second floor. She merely lept onto the balcony. It’s just that it can’t be seen from the camera.

Itsuki once again reverted to his thoughtful expression and continued to look at the sleeping Mikuru.

When Mikuru wakes up and realizes her current situation, she will be so embarrassed that she’ll probably throw anything at Itsuki that she can lay her hands on. After all, she was staying all alone with a guy and wearing only a T-shirt. It’s only natural that she would think she has been molested and proceed to beat the crap out of Itsuki, right? Please do let the story go in this direction.

Despite all these expectations, it's time for another commercial. We now present you with these messages from Yamatsuchi Model Store, again announced by our female protagonists.

After the commercial, the story now takes us to a brand new setting, with all the battles from before all completely forgotten. Suddenly we're now in a romantic comedy, I seriously don't know what the director is thinking anymore.

According to the script, Mikuru has settled down in Itsuki's place, and the story's now basically a fluff story about a young couple living together. The romance is so cheesy that one feels like playing dead just to get through the embarrassment of having to watch this.

Scenes include Itsuki trying to swallow some terrible cooking by an excited Mikuru; Mikuru sending Itsuki off to school at the door, accidentally touching Itsuki's finger, and jumping in shock in an exaggerated way; Mikuru blushing furiously; and Mikuru working hard on the chores and merrily greeting Itsuki as he returns from school.

I felt like screaming, *Give me a break already!* However, screams like these are likely to fall on deaf ears, so naturally I suppressed the impulse. Itsuki and Mikuru continue singing songs of praise for pure romance. Koizumi, mind if I swap places with you?

By the way, Koizumi Itsuki is currently living with his sister - in order to accommodate the sudden changes to the script, this ten year old fifth grader was brought in…… Sorry, she just had her birthday last month, so she's now eleven. She's now seen running around and tagging along with Itsuki and Mikuru. Now this is yet another enigmatic scene, just what was the meaning in introducing Itsuki's sister anyway?

Amidst all this romance, the battle between Mikuru and Yuki over Itsuki has now been moved into Itsuki's school.

Now who would've thought that Yuki would have transferred into Itsuki's school? I have no idea how on Earth the director came up with such filler material. As far as the plot goes, Yuki has abandoned her black cloak having decided that it would be a better strategy for her to befriend Itsuki in order to get closer to him, while marginalizing Mikuru at the same time. She began her mental assault on Itsuki by placing love letters inside his shoe locker. She then followed that up by bringing two sets of boxed lunches, looking for Itsuki during lunch time, waiting for Itsuki by the school gate after school, and secretly keeping photos of Itsuki in her wallet. I think that's more of an inspiration than a strategy.

Needless to say, Mikuru also went on the defensive against Yuki's maneuvers. She promptly transferred into Itsuki's school as well. Wouldn't it be better if they both transferred at the beginning of the story instead? Since Mikuru is here to protect Itsuki, it wouldn't be odd for both of them to be in the same school. In fact, it would sound absolutely normal.

Unbelievably, and without any explanation at all, Mikuru and Yuki did not fight each other with their mysterious beams and flashing wands. Seems like both of them have now switched their objective into seeing "who can capture Itsuki's heart first."

The story was already quite confusing to begin with, and now it has developed into a two girl romantic harem story.

It was pretty obvious that Yuki would be at a disadvantage. Since Mikuru and Itsuki are now living together, they have all the right conditions to becoming a couple. For Yuki, who no one knows where she's staying, this is a difficult wall to climb, just like how the Great Wall of China has deterred the northern nomadic tribes from invading.

In order to turn things around, the script has Yuki resort to extreme methods.

"……"

"Waa! What are you doing?"

Disregarding the situation, Yuki embraced Itsuki tightly. Looks like the director wanted to shake Itsuki up by giving him some sudden physical contact with girls. Yet the executor of this plan, Yuki, was way too expressionless. It's really hard to read any emotional upheavals from this. Instead, this scene looked rather absurd.

This is because her movements and expression were not congruent at all.

On the other hand, Mikuru ought to look jealous upon finding the two of them embracing each other. Meanwhile Itsuki doesn't even seem slightly concerned with all of this commotion. There's just no emotion at all in their acting.

Then again, one shouldn't really be concerned with what Itsuki does anyway.

In fact, looking at the clock, it's about time for all the actors to gather around to wrap things up for the ludicrous finale.

Maybe they've begun to grow tired of this lighthearted high school romantic subplot, in which they've come to an unspoken truce. Mikuru and Yuki would occasionally don their usual costumes and return to their posts as a battle waitress and alien magician, where they would go into random skirmishes.

The story becomes more and more confusing with the development of the following scenes:

Mikuru and Yuki + Yuki's magic apprentice cat Shamisen fighting in the back alley;

Mikuru and Yuki + Shamisen fighting in the bamboo garden at the back of the school;

Mikuru and Yuki slugging it outside someone's residence, with Shamisen looking very bored;

Mikuru and Yuki running round and round in Itsuki's house, while the little sister laughs in amusement and carries Shamisen in her arms.

After all these irrelevant scenes, the viewer would be utterly exasperated to find that the romantic triangle subplot has reappeared for no reason once again.

So far, Itsuki has remained indecisive over Mikuru and Yuki. Looking at his experience, it's only natural for the audience to curse his good luck, and it's pretty obvious that the audience would be completely composed of males. Sadly, the god in charge of the script, who also happens to be the Ultra Director, has kicked all those noises out of the window and was determined to continue stubbornly.

That is why the development of the plot has so far been like a gorilla participating in a cycling race without knowing how to brake. She would crash every time she turns, and then she would barge her way forward as though nothing had ever happened.

Yet, no matter how many brilliant ideas our Ultra Director had, no matter how inconsiderate she was, she eventually realized that if this "shoot as we go along" approach were to continue without an ending, the story would just go on and on, though it wasn't till very late that she had noticed.

How late was it? To the point of nearly getting burnt on the arse if no ending were made, of course.

Anyway, there won't be any closure if the story is allowed to run astray like this. So all the broken scenes of each character doing god-knows-what have been forcefully joined together and were rushed along as we approach the end.

Finally, we decided to have Yuki remember the reason she came here in the first place and have her declare a final battle with Mikuru.

One morning, Mikuru found a letter inside her shoe locker. Inside was a small note, with words written as though they were printed from a printer that read, "Let's put an end to this."

You know, if Yuki really wanted to annihilate Mikuru, she didn't have to go through the trouble of notifying her beforehand. She could have done so in all the previous battles. Come to think of it, Yuki would sometimes be an expressionless high school student who would stand aside and do nothing, and other times she would be an enigmatic alien who would do battle with Mikuru. Just what *does* she want to be?

Mikuru's thoughts were just as enigmatic. After reading the note, Mikuru looked determined as though she were preparing to do something while clutching the note. She looked far off into the

distance and nodded her head vigorously. Just what on earth has she realized? I've probably said this many times already, but I just can't understand at all. The only person who could understand would be the one who has never even shown herself in front of the camera.

As a cameraman, I may not be able to understand, but I do know that, thankfully, everything in this world that has a beginning must have an end, providing salvation for one stuck in a seemingly never-ending infernal hell.

And *finally,* we have come to the climax of the story.

Making her cameo once again, "Tsuruya-san" now came forward and asked Mikuru, who was looking troubled,

"What's wrong, Mikuru? You look as though you got molested by an old geezer. Or did your doctor say you've got athlete's foot?"

Standing by the corner of the classroom, Mikuru replied,

"The time has finally arrived. I must go and fight my final battle."

"Sounds great, Mikuru. We're counting on you! The fate of the Earth rests upon your shoulders!"

After muttering her lines, Tsuruya-san twitched her face, and finally laughed out loud, not being able to hold on any longer.

"……I'll do my best,"

Mikuru said softly at a volume that could barely be picked up by the microphone.

It's probably futile trying to question the deep flaws of this story. Just how did Mikuru and Tsuruya-san know each other? When Tsuruya-san first appeared as a mind-controlled zombie in the pond scene, it seems that they already knew each other then. If that's the case, then Yuki's mind control attacks ought to take place afterwards. This would make that battle scene more intense as the audience would realize that Mikuru and Tsuruya-san are supposed to be friends. I dare say that this mix up in the order of scenarios is all due to the director's negligence.

Of course, the annoying *deus ex machina* was adamant that she knew what she was doing, and ignored all these accusations, while pouring all her passion into shooting whatever came into her mind. As a result, she has slaved ordinary people like me to exhaustion already.

It was decided that the final battle would take place at the roof of the school.

Yuki waited on the roof during lunch time, dressed in her black magician cloak with Shamisen clinging to her shoulder.

A few seconds later, the door to the roof opened and Mikuru, in her battle waitress costume, now entered.

“D, did you wait long?”

“Very long.”

Yuki answered frankly. In fact, Mikuru had gone to the bathroom to change into her costume, which was why she took so long. As cameraman, I too have waited for quite some time.

“Then……”

The ever frank Yuki now recited the long-prepared dialogue,

“This time, we will put an end to all of this. We do not have much time. This must end in the next few minutes at the latest.”

“I feel the same way too…… But! Itsuki-kun will definitely choose me! Um…… This may sound embarrassing, but that’s what I firmly believe!”

“Unfortunately, I do not intend to respect his wishes. I need his powers, that is why I must have him. Even if it means conquering the whole Earth.”

Well you could always conquer the planet first *then* kidnap Itsuki along the way. Because by then no one would be able to resist you, and Mikuru will be isolated as most people would have followed the majority and would gladly hand Itsuki over to you. Even a cute battle waitress would have a hard time trying to overturn this overwhelming majority.

If you even have the ability to conquer the Earth, what’s so difficult about capturing Itsuki?

“You won’t have your way! That’s the reason I arrived from the future!”

Ah, yes, of course. I nearly forgot, Mikuru is a battle waitress *from the future*. But the movie’s almost finished now, I simply don’t know why the screenwriter wanted to include this time traveling plot device when it’s hardly ever used.

The laser battles between Yuki and Mikuru now commence once again.

Mikuru went “Hiyaaa!” and “Take this!” while shooting lasers, beams, missiles and mini black holes from her eye. On the other hand, Yuki simply remained silent and waved her wand.

We must create an atmosphere which can’t be done with computer effects alone! Under this command, firecrackers were used extravagantly on the roof. Even though these were all

abandoned firecrackers obtained from the toy store storage, they would still make loud noises when ignited. As a result, a few teachers came rushing up from downstairs and gave us a good scolding.

Getting scolded by the teachers is inevitable when you play with fireworks in school.

Should my disciplinary record be given negative points as a result, please have them transferred over to the director, thank you. Even if she were to pool all the negative records of Asahina-san, Nagato and Koizumi, she would still be able to get herself off the hook thanks to her excellent academic record. If that girl could sit down quietly, no one would find any fault in her.

Ignoring the cameraman's narrative, the battle rages on.

This is all credit to our director who, undaunted by the teachers' demands to leave the school roof at once, even warned them that if they were to stop us from shooting this important scene, she would threaten to sue the school for attempting to stifle the students' freedom of expression.

Now that would be pretty scary if that were to happen.

I don't care. Just don't play with fire! - The teachers hesitantly left the roof with this parting shot. The roof was now packed with curious onlookers who were increasing in numbers, causing Mikuru to become even more embarrassed.

Under intense pressure, Mikuru was now in a desperate situation. All her attacks on Yuki had been futile, and with Yuki slowly moving closer, Mikuru could only back up and was now forced to the fence by the edge of the roof.

"Now die in peace! I will select a nice tombstone for you. Try to perform many good deeds in the afterlife so that you can enjoy your karma when you reincarnate."

Yuki waved her wand as she bid her farewell to Mikuru,

"Goodbye."

In an instant, the wand known as the "Star Ring something" gave an unusual glow, and the inexpensive flashlight flickered a few times.

"Kyaa~~!"

Mikuru held her head and wrapped herself into a bundle.

Though it's hard to comprehend what kind of attack that was, we just know that it's a very powerful one. Watching the screen alone, one can see many lasers being fired from the wand, it must be some terrifying magical spell capable of disintegrating Mikuru to the molecular level.

You have to hang in there. If we don't arrange for a climax here, there won't be another chance.

"Waaa! Aaa~~!"

Yet all Mikuru could do was scream in agony.

Normally, one would be feeling annoyed already by the uselessness of the female protagonist, but since she is just too cute, one is ready to tolerate that.

However, even if someone were willing to tolerate her, at this rate, Mikuru would be defeated. Under the mainstream concept of good triumphing over evil, the ending of this movie would provide a thinly-veiled satire on how those in power would always win in reality.

"……!"

Obviously the movie was not going to end like that. Standing in the side of justice, our last-minute hero is not going to just disappear like that when the story is approaching its end. An invisible hand would always arrive coincidentally, which is just plain impossible in real life, to repel evil and rescue the damsel in distress. Yet that was the scenario thought up by our director.

The person who came in to rescue Mikuru was of course Koizumi Itsuki. I mean, who else can it be? Without any subplots, there was simply no room to introduce new characters anyway.

In the nick of time, Itsuki grabbed Mikuru and successfully dodged Yuki's attack. Yuki's magic beams seem to be coordinating with the stunt as they were slowed down as well.

"Are you all right, Asahina-san?"

After saying that, Itsuki turned to face Yuki and stretched his arm towards her,

"I can't allow you to hurt her. Yuki-san, please show some mercy."

Seeing Itsuki standing with his legs wide open in front of a worn-out Mikuru, determined to protect the pretty girl at any cost, Yuki showed signs of contemplation as she looked at the cat on her shoulder. She's probably thinking if she can't get Itsuki on her side, should she kill him along with Mikuru as well?

Yet, it was an unexpected character who answered that question for her,

"What's there to think about? All you need to do is steal that young man's conscience. I hear that you have the ability to mind control other people. So just mind control him and then lure him to somewhere safe. Then you can easily eliminate this girl who dares stand against you."

The one speaking was Shamisen, so you could guess how horrified I was. I specifically told him many times not to talk, and he just wouldn't shut up. He can forget about his meal tonight.

"Understood."

The ever composed Yuki lightly tapped her star-shaped wand on Shamisen's head, and the cat quickly shut his mouth.

Yuki then spoke as though talking to herself,

"That was ventriloquism."

After announcing that as a matter-of-fact, she raised her Star-whatever god-damned wand and said,

"Then bring it on, Koizumi Itsuki. I will make you into my puppet."

After some cheap sound effects, a flash of lightning emitted from the star-shaped tip of the wand.

Needless for me to say, one can pretty much guess how things are going to develop, so I'll just make a brief description of what follows.

To make things simple, Itsuki's hidden power has now been released to its maximum potential. Not even aware of it himself, Itsuki, being forced into a hopeless situation, now finds his secret power being awakened and has become a full-fledged esper. This esper power is so great that it can't be controlled, not even by Itsuki himself. Using this mysterious power, which is probably caused by emotional turmoil, he managed to reflect all of Yuki's offensive and attacked the black-cloaked alien with all his might.

"……How unfortunate."

"Meow~."

Leaving these two lines, the enigmatic partners Yuki and Shamisen were blasted off into the far end of the universe, making an unimpressive yell of defeat.

After sending off Yuki and Shamisen, Itsuki turned around and said softly to the female lead,

"It's all over now, Asahina-san,"

Mikuru lifted her terrified little face and looked at Itsuki with what seemed like glowing eyes.

Itsuki stretched his arm to pull Mikuru up to her feet, then placed his hands on the balcony rail as he looked up to the skies. Following his gaze, Mikuru also looked upwards; the camera also did the same and turned towards the clear blue skies.

It's obvious this pan-up technique was used because no one knew how to connect the scenes properly.

Under the cherry-blossom filled streets on a cool autumn day, Mikuru and Itsuki walked side by side with each other. How infuriating to see that the waitress costume actually matches well with the school's uniform.

Coincidentally, a strong gust of wind came wooshing in, blowing the scattered cherry blossom petals into little spirals. For the whole movie, only this scene was genuinely natural.

Carrying a smile, Itsuki took down the petals which had fallen onto Mikuru's silky hair. Looking embarrassed, Mikuru's cheeks now reddened, and she slowly closed her eyes.

The camera focus then suddenly moved away from the two of them and into the blue autumn skies above. Why are we doing a pan-up again?

The ending theme, which was randomly nicked from somewhere, now begins to play as the credits roll.

Last but not least, a post-filming narrative was added in the end. And so this SOS Brigade presentation, the story of "Asahina Mikuru's Adventure Episode 00," now ends in a very confusing manner.

It was rare to have a movie that was messy from beginning to end. If this sort of mix-and-match thingy can be called a movie, then it would be too disrespectful to those who actually give their all to seriously produce movies. Yet for some reason, this horrid movie was actually quite popular. At first, this movie was supposed to be screened together with the other movies made by the Film Club, but in the end our movie had shoved aside all their productions and occupied the screening room's projector. I hear this was to give in to the growing audience demand for the movie, but this was mainly due to someone making a lot of noise in lobbying for it. Of course the fact that Asahina-san had a lot of admirers also helped.

I later heard that the poor guys at the Film Club were forced to screen their movies in broken segments whenever they had the opportunity.

As no fee was charged, we naturally did not make any money. Yet the movie's success prompted the producer-director to begin drafting plans for a sequel. She even made an edited version titled "Asahina Mikuru's Adventure Director's Cut," which was burnt into DVD to be sold in the market. Both a teary-eyed Asahina-san and I are now in the process of convincing her to let go of that idea.

Though no matter what she decides to do, we'll always end up in a mess. Forget it, it's going to be some time before it becomes a mess, if the SOS Brigade still exists by then.

……It'll still exist, right?

I guess I have to ask a time traveler that question then. I just hope the information's not classified - I quietly tell myself.

Charmed at First Sight LOVER

It all began with an annoying phone call.

It's always like this every year. Once Christmas is over, all the festive feeling simply vanishes without a trace. As we count down towards the end of the year, when Haruhi would begin the activities that she'd come up with, I had a brief period of winter vacation in which I could get some breathing space.

At that time, I was busy with the end-of-year spring cleaning chores, while wrestling with Shamisen in my room,

"Hold still. Be a good boy, it'll be over soon,"

"Meow~"

I ignored his protests and lifted up the twisting furball, with new fur grown for winter, holding him under my armpit.

Memories of the time Shamisen reduced my cherished jean jacket to a piece of worthless cloth serve as a painful reminder to regularly cut his claws. Shamisen also seems to have a good memory as well for a cat, as every time he sees me walking towards him with a nail cutter, he would always attempt to escape at the fastest speed possible.

It was a nightmare trying to catch him, as I had to hold down a cat that would claw, kick and bite endlessly, while I tried to straighten his paws in order to cut his claws to a reasonable length, one by one. My hands would always be covered in claw marks once it was over, but while physical wounds can always be healed, the embroidery on my jean jacket can never be mended, so I dare not relax for a moment. How I miss the days when he could eerily speak and understand the human language. What happened to the straight-talking you?

Forget it, if he starts speaking again, it means something big has happened again. A cat ought to behave like one and just make meowing noises.

As I was done trimming the claws on Shamisen's right front paw and was working towards his left front paw…

"Kyon-kun! You've got a phone call!"

Barging into my room without knocking was my sister, carrying the cordless phone in her hand. When she saw Shamisen struggling in a battle of dignity and authority between cat and human, she smiled,

"Ah, Shami, do you need help cutting your claws? Let me help!"

Shamisen turned his gaze away from her, as though she were a busybody, and snorted like a human. I once asked my sister to help me cut his nails. At that time we split our tasks; I was in charge of holding his paws while my sister was in charge of the cutting. Unfortunately this eleven-year-old fifth grader didn't know when she was going too far, so she didn't have the talents for cutting nails either. In the end she cut far too deep into Shamisen's nails and he went on a hunger strike for a week in protest. Compared to her, my cutting skills were obviously better, but as always he would still run and claw everywhere. Are the brains of a cat as big as their foreheads?

"Who is it?"

I put down the nail cutter and picked up the phone receiver. Seeing a chance to escape, Shamisen quickly jerked loose and kicked off my knee before finally running out of the room.

My sister happily picked up the nail cutter and said,

"Um… it's a guy. I don't know him, but he says he's your friend!"

She then ran off to chase after Shamisen and disappeared into the corridor outside. I stared at the phone and thought,

Who could it be? If it's a guy, then it couldn't be Haruhi or Asahina-san. If it was Koizumi, then my sister would've recognized him as well. Taniguchi, Kunikida and my other friends would always call me on my cell phone, not my home phone. If it's some boring telephone poll or salesperson, they can go to hell… I thought as I pushed the talk button.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is that Kyon? It's me, it's been a while."

As the rough voice said the first sentence, wrinkles appeared on my forehead.

Who the hell's this guy? I never heard this voice before.

"It's me! We were in the same class in junior high, remember? Do you know how much I've sighed during the past six months as I was thinking of you?"

What the!? That's gross!

"Identify yourself. Who are you?"

"It's Nakagawa. We were still classmates a year ago, have you forgotten after just a year? Or have you made new friends in high school and now you've forgotten all your classmates from junior high? How cold-hearted!"

The voice in the phone sounded very sad, yet…

“Of course not,”

I opened my memory banks and retraced my memories in my third year of junior high. Nakagawa, huh… I think I remember there was such a person in my class. He was a wide-headed, broad-shouldered, and a muscular athletic looking guy. I think he was in the Rugby Club.

But… I once again looked at the receiver.

We were only classmates in our third year, and we weren’t particularly close to each other. We hung out with different groups in class. While we would occasionally greet each other when we walked by, I definitely don’t remember ever having a conversation with him. After graduation, Nakagawa’s name and appearance never even registered once in my mind.

I picked up the claw shreds dropped by Shamisen on the ground and said,

“Nakagawa, is it? So you’re Nakagawa, it really has been a while. So, how are you doing? I remember you entering an all-boys school. Well? Why are you calling me now? Have you become the Secretary of the Alumni Association?”

“That position has already been filled by Sudou, who’s now in Municipal High, but that’s not important, of course I’m calling you for a reason. So listen carefully, because I’m serious about it,”

You called all of a sudden just to say you’re serious? After such an ambiguous sentence, my wits were at an end as to guessing just what he was trying to say.

“Kyon, you have to seriously hear me out. The only one I can talk to about this is you, you’re my lifeline,”

Now isn’t that exaggerating a bit? Alright already, hurry up and say it. I’ll just have to hear what you’ve got to say to a classmate who wasn’t that close to you in school and has no impression of you after graduation.

“I think I’m in love,”

“…”

“I’m serious. I’ve been troubled about it. For these past few months, whether I was awake or asleep, I can only think of this,”

“…”

“I’m up to the point where I can no longer concentrate on doing anything else. No, that’s not true. I still managed to immerse myself in my studies and club activities. Thanks to that, my grades have actually improved, and it took less than a year for me to become a regular on my team.”

"…"

"This was all fueled by my love. Do you understand, Kyon? I'm so troubled deep inside. After looking for your home number in the junior high school book, do you know how long I hesitated before calling you? Even now, my body is still trembling. This is love, it's the amazing power of love that has compelled me to call you. I hope you understand."

"But, Nakagawa…"

I licked my lips. A cold sweat trickled down my forehead. Oh god, I should never have answered the phone…

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can accept your love… All I can say is I'm sorry. I really am, I just can't promise you anything,"

I guess you could say a cold shiver just went down my spine. Now let me set the record straight, I am an absolutely normal heterosexual male. My preference for "the same team" weighs less than that of a humming bird, in other words, it's non-existent. Whether subconsciously or unconsciously, my preference has been "straight". See? Aren't I right? My body would go hot just thinking about Asahina-san. If Koizumi had called me saying such stuff, I would've hung up already. By the way, I'm not bisexual either. Do I make myself clear?

My mind was full of rhetoric I wasn't sure who to address to, I continued to speak on the receiver,

"So, Nakagawa, we can still remain as friends, but…"

Though we don't have anything between us that could warrant us as friends,

"I don't think I'll be able to commit myself to a romantic relationship, I'm sorry. That's all. If you want to pursue romance, try the boys school you're studying at instead, as I intend to lead a normal high school life. I'm glad to be able to hear your voice after so long. If we should ever meet in an Alumni Gathering, I'll pretend not to remember and would still treat you with respect. I also won't tell anyone about this, so good bye…"

"Hold it, Kyon!"

Nakagawa said sounding astonished,

"What are you talking about? Don't get me wrong, you're not the person I'm in love with. Where'd you get such ideas anyway? That's gross,"

Then what were you saying all those romantic stuff for? If you're not saying it to me, then who was it for?

“Actually I don’t really know her name, I just know it’s a girl from North High…”

Though I hadn’t completely understood what he was talking about, I breathed a sigh of relief, like a soldier in the battle trenches relieved at hearing that a truce has been made. There was nothing scarier than hearing a confession of love from a guy… for me, that is.

“Can you please elaborate more? Just who was it that you’re in love with?”

There is a limit to talking so confusingly. I am this close to putting you in my ignore list, you know?

By the way, what was wrong with this guy? Talking about loving someone already in his first year in high school. Even if it is love, it still is quite embarrassing to actually say who you like.

“It was in spring… sometime in May,”

Nakagawa began recalling his memories, he sounded very nostalgic as well,

“That girl was walking with you. I only need to close my eyes and her image would appear in my mind. Ah… her appearance is just so adorable, absolutely beautiful. Not only that, I even saw a glowing aura behind her back. That wasn’t my illusion, yes, it was as holy and pure as the heavens shining upon the earth…”

His remembrance sounded like those dangerous drug hallucinations,

“I was completely overwhelmed. It was a feeling I’ve never had in my life, it’s as though an electric current just went through my whole body… No! It was like being struck by a mega-lightning bolt that nailed me to the ground. I then stood there for hours, it seems as though I’ve lost all sense of time. By the time I regained my senses, it was already nightfall. And then I realized, this is love!”

Let us organize Nakagawa’s Andromeda Strain-induced ramblings. From what he has said, he saw me walking with someone back in May, and he was awestruck by that person, who happens to be a North High girl… in that case, the suspects are significantly narrowed down.

The number of girls that have walked on the streets with me and Haruhi was very small, and I’m not making this up. If it’s limited to North High schoolgirls, then my sister would be off the list, which would leave just the three SOS Brigade girls.

This means…

“This has all been determined by fate,”

Nakagawa continued to revel in his glorious moment,

“You know, Kyon? I had never believe in those mythical things like love at first sight. I too had considered myself to be a materialistic person. Yet love has arrived so suddenly, and it has opened my eyes. There really is love at first sight, Kyon~”

Why must I listen to you ramble on and on? Love at first sight? Seems like your eyes have been covered by some external skin.

“N, no… that’s not true!”

Looks like this fellow was pretty sure of himself,

“I’m not the sort to be fooled by a girl’s looks or figure, what’s most important is her inner character. I saw through to her inner character with one look, and that was enough. That powerful impact made a strong impression on me that will be impossible to replace. Sadly, I just can’t express this in words, all I can say is I’ve fallen in love. No, I’m still falling… do you understand, Kyon?”

That was what I didn’t understand.

“Forget it, let’s leave that aside,”

I decided to put an end to Nakagawa’s never ending insane chatter,

“You say you were struck by the lightning thrown out by that girl back in May, right? But it’s already winter now. It’s over half a year now, just what have you been doing until now?”

“That’s it, Kyon, now that you’ve mentioned it, I now feel even more depressed. I’ve been at a loss of what to do for these past few months. My mind has never rested since then, as my feelings could not find a way out. I was thinking all the time whether I would be a good match for that girl. I’ll be frank, Kyon, I only just thought about contacting you recently. It was because you were walking beside her that I remembered you and decided to look up the junior high school book for your number. Her beauty is just so dazzling, never before has a girl made me go crazy like this.”

To lose oneself completely over a girl whose name you don’t even know, and to be stressed about it for nearly half a year, isn’t your obsession a bit too scary?

Asahina-san, Haruhi, Nagato - their faces appeared respectively in my head. I decided to go straight to the point. To be honest, I already felt like hanging up long ago, but judging from how seriously intoxicated Nakagawa sounded, if I hung up on him, I’ll probably have to face a barrage of fatal serial calls from him.

“Describe what the girl you have fallen for looks like.”

Nakagawa went silent for a while…

“She had short hair,”

He said as though retracing his memories,

“And she wore glasses.”

Ah.

“The North High sailor uniform looked as though it was made specially for her. She looked gorgeous in it.”

Uh-huh.

“And she was completely engulfed in this glittering aura.”

Well, I don’t know much about that, but…

“Do you mean Nagato?”

It really was a surprise. At first I thought the person that would drive Nakagawa nuts would either be Haruhi or Asahina-san, I never thought it would be Nagato. Taniguchi sure knows how to grade his girls. The first time I saw her, I thought she was just a silent and weird ancient doll sitting in the club room, I never knew there were so many people with such refined taste. Of course, my impression of Nagato now has changed greatly since then, especially in the past few months.

“So her name’s Nagato, is it?”

Nakagawa’s voice began to sound excited,

“How do you spell that? Can you please tell me her full name?”

Nagato Yuki. Nagato as in the battleship Nagato, Yuki as in “having hope”.

“…It’s a good name. One would think of the impressive battleship Nagato, while her name Yuki symbolizes that there is hope… Nagato Yuki-san… it’s just as I thought, it’s a clear name, full of possibilities. Elegant, yet not overbearing, and it doesn’t sound aloof. It’s just as I have imagined it to be!”

How did he imagine it to be? What sort of delusion could he see with just one look? You say you only care about inner character, may I ask what does one’s inner character have to do with love at first sight?

“I just knew,”

He said matter-of-factly, his confidence was beginning to sound irritating.

“This is not a delusion. I’m sure of it, that no matter what she looks like or what her personality is like, she possesses a kind of rational beauty. I saw in her the wisdom and logic that one would find in a deity; she’s the sort of highbrow girl that one might never meet in one’s whole life,”

I think I’ll look in the dictionary for the word “highbrow” later, for the questions in my head still remain unanswered,

“That’s what I don’t get. Why is it that you know she would be noble just by looking at her once? You’ve never even spoken to her, you merely saw her from afar!”

“I just know, that’s why I’m so hopelessly in love with her!”

Why should I listen to you yell for no reason!?

“I’m so grateful to God. I’m so ashamed of myself for not believing in him before. Since then I have regularly gone to a nearby shrine to pray every week, I would also occasionally go to churches, both Catholic and Protestant.”

Praying blindly everywhere is more unfaithful than not believing anything at all. Besides, it’s not like you’ll get results every time you pray. Pick one deity and stick with praying to him.

“Yeah, you’re right,”

Nakagawa replied casually,

“I thank you, Kyon. I’m even more determined now because of you. From now on, I’ll only pray to one goddess, and that is the Goddess Nagato Yuki. She would be my only goddess, to whom I’ll give my unconditional love…”

“Nakagawa,”

As he’ll just go on and on, I quickly interrupted him. Partly because it just sounded too cheesy, and partly because I was becoming irritated for some reason,

“So what do you want? I already know why you called, but what next? You know it’s pointless, telling me about your love for Nagato.”

“I need you to relay a message for me,”

Nakagawa said,

“I hope you can give a message to Nagato-san. Please, you’re the only one who can help me. Since you were walking side by side with her, you should be pretty close to her, right?”

He’s sort of right. We were both members of the SOS Brigade, and we are still happily revolving as satellites orbiting around Haruhi’s gravity well. Besides, the Nagato he saw walking with me

was the bespectacled Nagato back in May. I see, so it was back then, the first SOS Brigade Mystery Search, the time when I went to the library with Nagato. How nostalgic… compared to then, my understanding of Nagato has now increased hundreds of times, so much so that I'm beginning to wonder if I've come to know too much about her.

With these memories in my mind, I asked Nakagawa,

"Right, you say you remember seeing me walking with Nagato…"

To be honest, I felt uncomfortable asking this question,

"But, why did you only think that I was merely close to her? Didn't you think that I could be dating Nagato?"

"Not at all,"

Nakagawa didn't flinch a bit,

"You are the sort who's fond of weirder girls. Like back in our third year… now what's her name, weren't you going out with that enigmatic girl?"

You, as a Nagato-lover, are the least qualified to comment on my preferences. I suddenly felt as though I'd just lost my balance, but it's obvious he got something wrong. Ah yes, Kunikida has gotten that wrong as well. I was just friends with that girl, now that I think about it, we've not even met since our graduation from junior high. I still do occasionally think of her every few days, I wonder if I should send her a New Year greeting card…

For some reason, I feel as though I'm digging my own grave, perhaps I should change the subject.

"So, what is it that you want me to relay? An invitation for a date? Or do you want me to ask for Nagato's phone number? I'm sure that's an easier favour to do,"

"No,"

Nakagawa's response was bullish,

"Right now I'm still a nobody, how could I just appear before Nagato-san like that? I'm just not qualified, that's why…"

He paused for half a beat or so,

"Can you please tell her… to wait for me."

"Wait for you to what end?" I said.

“Wait for me to propose to her. Will that do? Because right now I’m just a first year high school student without any social experiences.”

Well, I’m not that much different from you.

“That won’t do. Listen to me, Kyon. I’m going to work really hard from now on. No, the truth is I’ve already been working hard. At this rate, I would qualify for a state university with my grades.”

Well, it’s good to have a long-term objective.

“I’m going to do a major in Economics. I’ll continue to study hard once I’m in a university, and try to be the best amongst the North High graduates. Once I’m out in society, I’m not going to join some big company, but I’m going to get a job with a medium or small-sized firm.”

He sure knows how to talk, and it sounds as though it’s all going to happen. If a ghost were to hear him say such stuff, he’d probably laugh so hard he’d get a stomach ulcer.

“But I won’t be content with being a classless person. Give me three years… no, I’ll only need two years, I’ll learn all the knowledge that I’ll need to start a business.”

I’m not going to stop you, so go ahead and give it a try. If by then I’m having trouble with my career, mind if I work under you?

“After that, the company that I’ve created would take five years… no, I’ll try to settle this in three years, by then it’ll be listed in the Second Section of Topix. Its projected annual growth will be at least ten percent, and it’ll all be net profit.”

I find myself struggling to catch up with Nakagawa’s mode of thinking, but he seemed to be getting more excited as he went on,

“By that time, I will be able to take a small break, since all the preparations will be ready.”

“Preparations for what?”

“Preparations for my proposal to Nagato-san.”

I fell silent like a deep-ocean shellfish, while Nakagawa’s words felt like a torrent of waves splashing towards me.

“I still have two years before I graduate from high school, and four years from university. My in-job training would take two years, while it’ll take three years for me to set up a company and get it listed in public. That’s a total of eleven years. No, let’s round that off to ten years. In ten years, I’ll be a formidable entrepreneur…”

“Are you nuts?”

I'm sure you would all understand why I was suddenly so rude. What girl in her right mind would wait for him for ten years? Not to mention that the girl has never even met him before. To suddenly have a guy ask her to wait ten years for him so that he could propose to her, if she had actually waited mindlessly, then she wouldn't be from this world. Unfortunately, Nagato just so happens to be from out of this world, literally.

I bit my tongue and waited.

"I'm serious."

What's worse was that he actually sounded serious as well,

"I'm willing to bet my life on this, because I really mean it."

If sounds have blades in them, then his voice sounded as though it could cut through many wires at once.

Now what should I do to get this over with?

"Well… Nakagawa,"

The image of Nagato silently reading her book appeared in my mind,

"This is just my personal opinion, but Nagato actually has a lot of hidden admirers. So many that she's already feeling exasperated by them. I commend you for your fine taste in Nagato, but she is going to remain single for now, and the chances of her waiting ten years for you are close to zero."

I actually made all that up, how was I to know what would happen in ten years? I wasn't even sure of my own future.

"Besides, something this important ought to be told in person to Nagato herself. Though I'm reluctant to do it, I'll still help arrange a meeting for you. It's the winter vacation now, so it shouldn't be a problem asking her to spend one hour meeting you."

"I can't do it,"

Nakagawa's voice suddenly went soft,

"Right now, I don't think I'm capable of seeing her. If I saw Nagato-san's face, I would faint at once. Actually, I have seen her from afar recently. That time, it was just outside the supermarket by the station… though it was at night, I still recognized her back, I was instantly frozen, and I stood there until the supermarket was closing. If I were to meet her directly… the consequences would be unimaginable!"

Oh boy, Nakagawa has been completely infected by the love virus. He even set out his plans for the next ten years, such was an indication of how serious his illness was. While there exists a cure, it'll only be available after he has been awestruck by meeting the alien directly, and then having her reject him and run away.

Besides, he has already gone to great lengths to call a person he barely knew just to bemoan his agony. Even more terrifying, it was impossible to predict what he's going to say next. I already have to put up with Haruhi, and now Nagato has brought me another annoying person to deal with.

Sigh I deliberately sighed loudly so that Nakagawa could hear,

"Well, basically I understand already. Just repeat what you want me to say to Nagato."

"Thank you, Kyon,"

Nakagawa sounded really grateful,

"We'll definitely invite you to our wedding. I'll have to ask you to write a speech for us then, you'll be the first to give the speech. I'll never forget you for my whole life. If you ever feel like making a name with me, I'll make sure there'll always be a place in my company for you."

"No thanks, just hurry up already!"

I listened to Nakagawa's anxiously irritating voice while placing the receiver on my shoulder as I grabbed a blank piece of paper.

After noon the next day, I quietly climbed up the slope towards North High. As the altitude slowly rises, the white vapour coming out of my breath became more visible. As to why I was walking to school during winter vacation, it was because the SOS Brigade was holding its regular meeting today.

Today was also the day on which we would do some spring cleaning of the club room. Asahina-san would occasionally sweep the floor, but as with the second law of thermodynamics, in which the total entropy of any isolated thermodynamic system tends to increase over time, this rule also applies to our club room. (The concept of entropy originated from the German physicist Rudolph Clausius in 1862 to define the dispersal or degradation of usable energy (often incorrectly explained as "disorder") in a system. In a theoretical reversible process this amount would remain the same, though in any real process this amount increases (irreversible). For example, if no one had offered to help clean a lazy person's room, the room could only get messier — it'll never be tidied up all by its own.) All sorts of junk were gradually brought into the club room to create a kind of orderly chaos, and the culprit responsible for all this mess was none other than Haruhi, who would grab anything she fancies. Not to mention Koizumi bringing in one board game after another, Nagato bringing in more and more thick books and reading

them at the speed of a flying arrow, as well as Asahina-san, every day trying to brew the perfect tea… In other words, everyone besides me was guilty. It'll become chaotic if we continue to leave it like this, so I suggested it's time to bring the stuff back to each of their homes, with the exception of Asahina-san's cosplay wardrobe staying at least.

"Man, what a pain,"

I just couldn't walk at a relaxed pace because of an extra piece of note paper in my jacket pocket.

That note contained a word-by-word dictation of Nakagawa's declaration of love for Nagato. It was so retarded that I had to restrain myself from throwing the pencil away many times when writing it down. The only people I could think of who could say such embarrassing stuff without any shame would be some professional conmen; besides that, I can't think of anyone else. "Wait ten years for me"? Give me a break already!

Walking into the mountain breeze, I arrived at the familiar school complex.

Arriving at the club room complex, I was still an hour early for the meeting.

This was not because I was afraid of the rule that whoever comes last has to treat everyone, that rule only applies for activities outdoors.

On the phone last night, Nakagawa said before going,

"Don't just copy it down and then give it to her, you'll just be a substitute author then. Who knows, maybe she wouldn't read it. You have to recite the whole thing to her in person, using the same passionate tone that I just used…"

That was the most ridiculous request I've ever heard. I have no reason, nor am I so simple, to be jerked around by that idiot. Yet after sincerely pleading with me, coupled with the fact that I'm generally a nice person, I just couldn't find a way to refuse him. Therefore, I desperately need to find a situation where no one else was around besides Nagato. If I went an hour early, the other members wouldn't have arrived yet, except for the familiar, ever reliable and ever present alien-created Living Humanoid Interface, Nagato Yuki.

After formally knocking the door and hearing a silent reply, I opened the door.

"Hi there!"

I wonder if I sounded too unnatural? My mind urged me to rephrase that sentence,

"Hey, Nagato. I knew you'd be in here."

Inside the club room, filled with the chill of winter, Nagato looked like a life-sized doll which one would not detect any warmth from, sitting quietly on her seat and reading some thick hardback book about some sort of disease.

"…"

The poker face looked at me without any expression. Looking as though she was going to touch her forehead, she lifted her arm, but then lowered it again.

That movement looked as if she was about to push up her glasses, but Nagato doesn't wear glasses now. It was I who said she looked better without glasses, and it was she who decided to leave it like that. So what was that action for? Has the habit from six months ago come back?

"The others haven't arrived yet?"

"Not yet."

Nagato answered concisely and returned her gaze back to the page packed with so many words that there were almost no spaces between them. Was she the sort that would feel a sense of great loss if she wasn't doing anything?

I walked stiffly towards the window and saw the central courtyard below, which was visible from there. As today was a holiday, the school was nearly empty. Some of the more cold-resistant members of the various sports clubs can be heard chanting from afar through the window glass.

I stood facing Nagato. It was the usual Nagato, her skin white as ever, and her face blank as ever.

Now that I think about it, we haven't had a four-eyed girl for quite some time. Who knows if Haruhi would grab another four-eyed girl just to do a corporate reshuffle?

I thought of such useless stuff while taking out the well-folded notebook paper out from my pocket,

"Nagato, there's something I need to say to you,"

"What is it?"

Nagato flicked a page with her finger tips, I took a deep breath and said,

"Some lame bozo says he fancies you, I've decided to help him all the way and help him declare his confession. Well? You want to hear?"

According to my plan, the moment Nagato says "no" right there, I would proceed to tear up the paper to shreds. But Nagato just looked at me without saying anything. To me her icy-cold

looking eyes suddenly looked as warm as if they had melted into water, was it because my opening line was so impressive?

"…"

Nagato shut her lips tight and stared at me like a surgeon examining a patient,

"Is that so?"

She slowly uttered those three words above, while still looking at me without blinking. As she seems to be waiting for me to continue, I had no choice but to unfold the paper and began to recite Nakagawa's confession,

"Oh my Great Goddess Nagato, as Your most faithful follower, I am distressed that I can only express my adoration of you this way. May the Goddess please forgive my insolence. In fact, from the moment I laid my eyes on Your Holiness…"

Nagato kept looking at me while silently listening. Yet I was the one who was feeling more and more uncomfortable. As I was reading Nakagawa's stupefying confession, the whole thing just felt more and more stupid. Just what on earth was I doing? Was I nuts!?

Nakagawa's story ended at the time when he has bought a huge house in the suburbs and is living an idyllic life with two kids and a white dog. As I was reading this diary of the future, I noticed Nagato was still staring silently at me. I suddenly had a feeling I was doing something extremely stupid.

Why did I agree to do this!?

I stopped reciting. If I were to continue reading this piece of lunacy, even I'll go insane. It's unlikely I'll ever become close friends with Nakagawa, since I'd never hang out with someone who could come up with such cheesy lines. Now I knew why we barely knew each other back in junior high. After falling in love at first sight, his feeling incubated for nearly half a year before he suddenly asked me to be his messenger, and his message has to be a totally ridiculous love confession. Sigh, he was beyond help.

"Forget it. Anyway, that's about the gist of it. I'm sure you more or less get it?"

Nagato simply said,

"Understood."

She then nodded.

She does?

I looked at Nagato, and Nagato looked back at me.

Time passes by quietly as though the words of silence grew wings and flew around us…

"…"

Nagato slightly tilted her neck, but apart from that she didn't do anything else, but continued to stare at me. Um… now what? I should be talking, right?

As I was running through my vocabulary on what to say…

"I have received the message that you have relayed to me."

Her gaze never moved away,

"But, I cannot comply with his request."

She said in her usual calm manner,

"I cannot guarantee that my self-control mechanism can continue to remain stable for the next ten years."

After finishing, she shut her lips tight again. She never once changed her expression or moved her eyes away from me.

"No…"

The first to budge was me, I pretended to shake my head just so I could look away from those dark eyes of hers which looked as though they were about to suck me in,

"You're right. Ten years is just too long."

Though the confession's problem didn't just lie with a waiting time that was too long, I still breathed a sigh of relief. As to where this relief came from, to put it simply, I just didn't want to see Nagato getting close with Nakagawa or some other jerk like him. I don't deny that I still have some impression of that other Nagato in my mind when Haruhi had disappeared. Nakagawa wasn't too bad, he can even be classified as a nice guy, but I just can't get rid of the image of that Nagato looking distressed as she softly pulled my sleeve.

"I'm sorry, Nagato,"

I crumpled the piece of paper into a lump,

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have dictated this thing word-for-word, and I should've turned down Nakagawa's request on the phone. Please forget what just happened. I'll have a word with that idiot. Don't worry though, I don't think he's the sort that would become a stalker."

But, if Asahina-san were to suddenly have a boyfriend, I'd probably stalk him all day…

Huh? So that's why, that's how it is.

Now I knew what this uncomfortable feeling in my heart was.

Whether it was Asahina-san or Nagato, I just can't stand any guy getting between them and me! It was that simple. That was why I felt so relieved, I guess I'm an easy-to-understand guy.

What about Haruhi, you say? Ah, if it's that girl, then I'm not worried at all. Haruhi would usually ignore any guy that dares to pursue her. Should the skies one day fall and Haruhi actually begins to go out with someone, then she wouldn't be busy looking for aliens or time travelers. That should be a good news for the Earth, and I'm sure Koizumi would be delighted at the decrease in workload.

After that, the turbulent and surreal part of my life would come to an end. Maybe that day would really arrive, but I was sure it wasn't now.

I opened the club room window. The incoming wintry breeze, which was so chilly that it could cut a wound in the finger, clashed with the warm indoor air, which was warmed by our body temperatures. I thrust my arm out and threw the lump of paper I had in my hand as far as I could.

The lump of paper slowly floated along the wind and landed silently on the large grassy knoll adjacent to the corridor linking the main school complex and the club room complex. I guess it'll soon be blown into a water duct by the complex building, and then decompose along with the fallen leaves and return to nature…

But I guessed wrong!

"Oh shit!"

There was a person walking on that very corridor that suddenly changed direction and headed for the grassy knoll. That girl turned and glared at me as though I've just thrown a cigarette butt, and proceeded to pick up the lump of paper that I just threw.

"Hey! Don't pick that up! And don't read it either!"

Ignoring my futile protests, she picked up the garbage that no one asked her to, she then opened up the crumpled paper and began to read it silently.

"…"

Nagato continued to look silently at me.

Let us take some time to consider the following questions:

Q1. What was written on that piece of paper?
A1. A confession of love for Nagato.

Q2. Whose handwriting was on the paper?
A2. My handwriting.

Q3. What would a stranger think if he had read this?
A3. He'll probably misunderstand.

Q4. Then, what would Haruhi be thinking if she had read it?
A4. I don't even want to know.

And so, Haruhi read the piece of paper thoroughly for some minutes, and then lifted her head up and looked sharply at me, while revealing an evil smile that looked sinister, seemingly up to something.

…As expected, today was definitely not a good day!

Ten seconds later, she had already entered the club room in the most ferocious speed possible and was grabbing me by the collar,

"JUST WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING!? Are you an idiot!? I'm gonna have to throw you out of the window just to knock some sense into you!"

She yelled while carrying a smile, only that her smile looked a bit stiff. If the strength that she used to drag me towards the window were converted into energy, it would be enough to supply a day's worth of indoor heating. Not even my frantic attempt at explaining could reduce the intensity of this strength,

"No, wait, I can explain! I was helping this old classmate of mine called Nakagawa…"

"What!? Are you trying to shove all this to someone else!? It's your handwriting, isn't it?"

Haruhi said menacingly while she dragged me back, she then stared at me with her large bell-like eyes from a distance of just ten centimeters.

"You gotta let me go first, I can't say anything properly if you pull me around like that,"

As I was tugging and pulling with Haruhi, a fourth person had arrived at the wrong moment.

"WAH!?"

Asahina-san's eyes were as big as a tray as she stood outside the door. She elegantly covered her mouth and said,

"…Um… are you in the middle of something? I wonder if I should come back later…"

While we were in the middle of something, but it was nothing serious. Besides there's nothing fun about twisting and pulling with Haruhi, it would be a different story if it were with Asahina-san though… Anyway, please do come in. From the past to the present, I have never once denied Asahina-san the right to enter, nor do I intend to.

Furthermore, Nagato's sitting here in the club room as though nothing's happening, so there's no reason why Asahina-san couldn't come in. If she could help me get out of this mess, she was all the more welcome.

As I was smiling at Asahina-san while tussling with Haruhi at the same time…

"Oh my,"

The last member had arrived, sticking his head from behind Asahina-san,

"I wonder if I arrived too early?"

The fellow revealed a cheerful smile and swept aside his hair parting,

"Asahina-san, it would seem we have arrived at an unsuitable time. Perhaps we should return later until they settle some domestic affair. I'll pay for your coffee at the vending machine as well."

Hold it, Koizumi. If you were treating our wrestling around as some typical domestic squabble between a married couple, then I suggest you go have your eyesight examined. Oh, and don't try to use this as an opportunity to abduct Asahina-san. Asahina-san, this is really nothing, so there's no need for you to worry and nod your head and agree with him.

Currently Haruhi was clutching my shirt tightly with all the strength she could muster, while I grabbed on Haruhi's wrists. At this rate I'm going to suffer from ligament pains, I quickly decided to call for reinforcements,

"Hey! Koizumi! Where do you think you're going? Come and help me!"

"Hmm, now whose side should I stand on?"

Koizumi decided to play dumb, while Asahina-san stood stiffly and blinking non-stop like a terrified little rabbit. She didn't even notice Koizumi casually placing his hand on her shoulder as he attempted to play the knight in shining armour saving the damsel in distress.

What was Nagato doing then? I took a glance and noticed Nagato was doing what I thought she would do, she hardly looked concerned and continued to read her book. Oh come on, it was all because of you that I'm now in such big trouble, why can't you at least say something?

And then, Haruhi's clutches became even tighter,

“I must be blind as a bat! I can’t believe I’ve actually recruited someone so dumb as to write such a stupid love letter into my brigade! Now that pisses me off! You’re to resign immediately! Man, I feel so terrible, it’s like sticking a bare foot into a shoe full of cockroaches!”

Even though she was full of rage, Haruhi still managed to display an enigmatic looking smile. It’s as though she didn’t know what expression to use in such a situation,

“Before arriving here, I’ve already thought up of thirteen kinds of punishments! First, you are to leap up a wall with a dry salted fish in your mouth and fight for territory with other wild cats!And you have to wear cat ears while doing that!”

If Asahina-san were the one doing that in her maid uniform, I’m pretty sure it would be a sight to behold; if I were to do it, the next thing you’d see would be me being hauled off in an ambulance.

“Though we don’t have cat ears,”

I turned towards the window and sighed.

I’m sorry Nakagawa, if I don’t bust you, I’ll become the next object that gets thrown out of the window after that lump of paper. If possible, I didn’t want to reveal anything about you, but if Haruhi’s misunderstanding were to continue, even Mother Nature would be messed up.

I took a look at the widely opened eyes of the Queen of the Brigade, using the same comforting tone when trying to calm Shamisen down as I cut his claws, I said,

“Listen to me, it’s… you’ll have to let go of me first, Haruhi. I’ll explain everything until even your dull wits finally get it.”

Ten minutes later.

Haruhi sat on a steel chair with her legs crossed while sipping her green tea,

“Your friend sure is weird. Although he’s entitled to fall in love at first sight, this obsession is just pushing it too far. What a jerk.”

Love not only makes a person blind, it causes brain damage as well, you know. Ah well, it’s not that I disagree with her last statement anyway.

Haruhi waved the piece of wrinkled up letter,

“At first I had thought you had teamed up with that idiot Taniguchi to make fun of Yuki. Since it sounds like the stuff that he’d do, not to mention Yuki’s the quiet, obedient type of girl, she’s bound to get fooled.”

I don't think you'll be able to find anyone in this galaxy harder to fool than Nagato. But I didn't interrupt and listened quietly. Probably sensing me refraining from talking, Haruhi took a quick menacing glance at me before suddenly reverting to a relaxed expression,

"Forget it, you wouldn't even dare do such a thing, You neither have the intelligence nor the cunning anyway."

I wasn't sure whether she was complimenting me or dissing me, but at least I wouldn't do something an illogical elementary school kid would do. And no matter how crap Taniguchi was at expressing himself, he wouldn't do something so childish either.

"But…"

The one who lit the fuse was the resident fairy and angel of the SOS Brigade,

"I think it sounds romantic,"

Asahina-san said indulgently,

"If someone were to go crazy like that over me, I think I'd be happy… Ten years, huh? I'd certainly like to meet someone who was willing to wait ten years for me. So romantic…"

She clasped her fingers while her eyes glittered.

I wasn't sure whether the 'romantic' that Asahina-san spoke of was the same 'romantic' that I think of. I just felt that they have differing definitions. Maybe the vocabulary has changed in the future. After all, she was the sort of person who didn't even understand how a boat could float on water until someone explained it to her.

Oh yeah, Asahina-san's attire today was rather normal, a simple sailor uniform. This was because her maid uniform, nurse uniform and all other costumes have been sent to the laundry, including the frog suit as well. When Haruhi and I had carried the whole cosplay wardrobe containing Asahina-san's bodily fragrance to the laundry store, the store owner just kept staring at me and Haruhi, and that left a mental scar within me.

"Nakagawa and romance are basically insulated from each other,"

I gulped the remaining cold tea in my tea cup and continued,

"Even if he had been reincarnated in the wrong body, he's the sort of physical guy who's destined to never have a chance at becoming the male protagonist in a shoujo manga. His animal horoscope is represented by the black bear, the one with a crescent mark in his chest,"

As I said, I began to envision a figure that matches up with what he looked like in junior high.

"Really? He sounds like a gentle muscular guy to me."

Though that was far different from my image, the impression both images made was similar, since he does have a well-built physique. Yet my view on him was unlike that of Asahina-san's.

I really should apologize to him for describing him like that, and before I could destroy all evidence of Nakagawa's declaration of love - I ought to apologize to him for this as well, but I no longer have the strength to do it - Haruhi had already read it out passionately to everyone. After hearing it, Koizumi's reaction was different from that of Asahina-san's,

"Now that was a stunning speech,"

He continued with his ever pretentious smile,

"The letter generally revealed to the reader a good impression about the author. While it was slightly over-idealistic, the fact that he was down-to-earth and grounded in reality was commendable enough. Though the author kind of lost himself as a result of a sudden frenzy, from his words one could see his passion and ambition. If this Nakagawa-san can really work as hard as he says he will, then he is sure to become a remarkable person in the future."

This psychoanalysis sounds like something from a small-practice clinical psychologist. Can you really comment on someone's life just like that? If you can give such an irresponsible critique, then so can I. Just who are you trying to con anyway?

"However…"

Koizumi threw another smile at me,

"It requires a great deal of courage to use such language in a confession letter. And you reveal yourself to be a generally nice person by agreeing to dictate it. If I were you, my fingers would have been trembling too much to be able to write anything,"

What's that supposed to mean? Are you giving me a thinly-veiled criticism? Unlike you, I do cherish my friendship. I'll still go through the trouble of playing Cupid even knowing it'll be a waste of time.

I shrugged my shoulders and told Koizumi about what happened earlier,

"Nagato already gave me her reply long before you came,"

I spoke on behalf of Nagato, who was paying both Haruhi and Koizumi the same proportion of attention,

"She said ten years was too long. Well, that's expected, since I think so as well."

At this moment, Nagato, who had been silent so far, finally spoke,

"Let me see."

She stretched out her tiny fingers.

Now that surprised me, it seems to have surprised Haruhi as well.

“I guess you are curious about it,”

Haruhi said as though reading through the expression of the sole member of the Literature Club hidden under her bangs,

“Though Kyon’s only responsible for dictating this love letter, you could still take it home as a souvenir. After all, this letter is either very ambiguous or very honest, but it’s rare to find this sort of confession in this day and age,”

“Here you go.”

Koizumi received the wrinkled piece of paper from Haruhi and passed it over to Nagato.

“…”

Nagato lowered her eyes and began reading my handwriting. At times her eyes seems to be focused at the same place, as if trying to grasp the meaning of those lines of words.

“I cannot wait.”

Well, that’s to be expected.

But Nagato then added…

“But I can see him.”

A sentence which caused everyone in the room to fall silent, she then added another line which nearly made my jaw drop,

“I am curious.”

After finishing, she looked at me with her usual gaze.

It was the gaze I knew - a very determined gaze, as clear as a flawless, handmade glass artifact.

The spring cleaning ended not quite like a typical spring cleaning. When I suggested taking care of the books on the bookshelf, Nagato did not answer with a “yes” or “no”, but just stared silently at me. Seeing those eyes that barely hid a hard to describe sadness, I just couldn’t bear taking the books down. The only board game from Koizumi’s collection that ended up in the

trash can was a paper-made backgammon board that came with a magazine and was only played once.

Asahina-san's personal collection consisted of only her tea leaves anyway. On the other hand, for anything that Haruhi brought in, she responded with a resounding, "You can't throw that away!"

"Now listen up, Kyon. It's a sin to throw away something without ever using them. I would never do such a thing. Things that can still be used ought to be reused again and again. As long as their quality lasts, I would never throw them away. That's the spirit of environmentalism."

Over time, this room might gradually become a rubbish dump thanks to this girl. If you really care for the environment, then you shouldn't be minding the business of anything that isn't living, that's what I think anyway.

Haruhi tied a triangular handkerchief to her head, handed Nagato and Asahina-san a mop and broomstick, and gave me and Koizumi a bucket and cloth and ordered us to clean the windows,

"This will be our last time visiting this place this year, so we'll have to make this place sparkling clean before we can go home. Only then can we ensure that we can come back feeling at ease after the New Year,"

After receiving our orders, Koizumi and I began to clean the windows. Time to time I took a look at the North High schoolgirl trio, wondering whether they were cleaning the room or just spreading dust around. My partner then spoke softly to me,

"This is just between us. Besides the 'Organization', there are various other organizations that have wanted to approach Nagato-san. Because she is now just as important as Suzumiya-san and you. Among all the Integrated Data Entities, Nagato-san's existence is particularly unusual, especially recently."

I sat on the window sill and breathed some warm moist air onto my hands, trying to keep away the chilling wind which was lowering my body temperature with ease, while continuing to wipe the window with the wet cloth.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

It is actually quite easy to play dumb. Recently however, I experienced something with Nagato and Asahina-san that had nothing to do with this Koizumi and Haruhi, and the present me exists as a result. I could not sit idly by and play dumb with this current situation.

"I'll think of something,"

I continued, while looking relaxed on the outside.

This incident was started by me, so I should take care of it myself.

Koizumi wiped the inside of the window while smiling,

“Indeed, I’m counting on you this time. Just trying to prepare for the SOS Brigade’s end of year snow mountain field trip is enough to keep me busy. Besides, you could still mess around with Suzumiya-san to reduce stress. Unfortunately, I do not have such a luxury.”

“Then who’s the tomcat?”

Yet, the beautiful smile on Koizumi’s face became twisted,

“Don’t you think it’s about time that I take off this harmless looking mask and change this image that I don’t even know when I created it for myself? It is after all very tiring trying to talk courteously to a classmate all the time.”

If you feel so tired, then stop it already. I completely didn’t feel like controlling his expression.

“That won’t do. My present image fits perfectly with how Suzumiya-san would imagine me to be. I am quite an expert in understanding her mental conditions, after all,”

Koizumi sighed in an exaggerated way,

“On just this basis alone, I feel very envious of Asahina-san. She doesn’t even need to pretend, she only needs to be herself,”

“Didn’t you once say Asahina-san could be making up this appearance of hers as well?”

“Oh, did you actually believe what I said? If I can win your trust, then my hard work may have produced some fruit after all.”

Just as pretentious as ever. It’s nearly a year already, and his flamboyant way of speech still hasn’t changed a bit. Even Nagato’s heart has gone through some changes, but you’re still as fake as ever. Asahina-san doesn’t need to change, it is best that she remains the same for now. This is because I’ve met the other Asahina-san, and know that it’s a pre-determined fact that she would grow both physically and mentally.

“If I were to take on a different appearance…”

Koizumi began to wipe faster,

“Then it would not be a good omen. Keeping the status-quo is my duty. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to see me look serious.”

“Yeah, I certainly wouldn’t want to. Since you’re always grinning idiotically all the time, you’re ideally suited to stick closely around Haruhi and help her clean up her mess or plan stuff for her. I’m really looking forward to the mystery play in the snow mountain this time. That’s more than enough, right?”

“That has got to be the best compliment I’ve heard, please allow me to accept it in its entirety.”

I didn’t know whether he meant it or not, since anything that Koizumi said would end up as white vapour on the glass.

Later that night…

I stared at the sleeping face of Shamisen who had wrapped himself in a bundle on my bed, while indulging in a sense of warmth. While wondering deeply where that warm feeling came from, I might as well try and figure out where the division between love and lust begins and ends. At that moment a thought sparked in my head that cried out *That’s it!*…

“Kyon-kun! Your phone… it’s from the same person as yesterday…”

My sister once again held the phone receiver and opened the door to my room.

After handing the receiver which was playing some pop music tune to me, my sister then sat by the bed and began pulling Shamisen’s whiskers,

“Shami, Shami~ Shami’s so furry, sounding so purry~”

I looked at my sister looking cheerful, then at Shamisen looking unconcerned, then back to my sister singing away as I placed the receiver by my ear. Now what was I thinking about before all this?

“Hello?”

“It’s me,”

Nakagawa, my classmate from junior high, couldn’t repress the anxiety within himself and asked straight away,

“How’d it go? What did Goddess Nagato say? Please tell me, no matter what her reply is, I’m already prepared. Hurry up already, Kyon…!”

Sounds like a candidate struggling for a parliament seat in an election anxious about the latest exit polls.

“I’m sorry, but things didn’t go quite as planned,”

I waved at my sister signaling her to get out while trying to sound sorry,

“She said she won’t wait for you. She cannot imagine, and cannot guarantee a future ten years from now… that’s her answer,”

My mouth slickly relayed the facts out. “But I can see him.” …I thought deeply how Nakagawa would react to this peculiar sentence from Nagato…

“Is that so?”

Nakagawa sounded surprisingly calm,

“I guessed so as well. She couldn’t have agreed so easily,”

I continued to wave my hand, humming a mindless song, my sister had no choice, but to forcefully pick up a moaning Shamisen and walked out of my room. She probably wanted to sleep with him in her room. In about an hour, Shamisen would run with his tail between his legs back to my room. It’s typical for cats to feel aversion to humans who give them too much care and attention.

After my sister left, I grabbed the phone and began my inquisition,

“Hey! Is that all you have to say after I have to read such an embarrassing declaration for you?”

If you knew you were going to fail, then don’t ask me to be your messenger!

“Everything has to go through certain procedures,”

You are least qualified to lecture me when you yourself have skipped through warming up and jumped straight into proposing. You have disregarded the basic rules of Shogi, who on earth would do a checkmate on their first move anyway?

“I know, it must be distressing to receive a love confession from a complete stranger.”

If you knew that already you should have kept quiet in the first place. The only people who would knowingly step onto a landmine are members of the bomb squad or people seeking excitement.

“But I thought at least Goddess Nagato would become more or less interested in me.”

This was pretty much part of Nakagawa’s elaborate crime. Nakagawa was indeed the first person that Nagato felt “curious” about. Such was the devastating power of Nakagawa’s background. I dare guarantee that at least his shamelessness is unrivalled on the whole planet at present.

“That’s why, Kyon, I need to ask you for another favor.”

What is it this time? My kindred spirit was about to be chipped away completely now.

“Did you know that I joined the American Football Team in high school?”

Nope, this was my first time hearing it.

“Really? That’s the thing, besides this I don’t have any other requests. This time we’ll be having a friendly match with an American Football team from another boys school. Please do bring Goddess Nagato along to watch this match. Of course, I’m in the the starting lineup.”

“When’s the match?”

“Tomorrow.”

Didn’t I say this before? Handling just one difficult creature like Haruhi was enough for me. Why must their schedule be so tight all the time?

“There’s nothing I could do if Goddess Nagato is not willing to wait ten years for me. Despite this, I just hope I can move her with my heroics.”

Such a conclusive deduction. You should at least consider my position. Even if you don’t care about me, you ought to consider how busy the rest of us are going to be for the end of the year.

“Is it inconvenient for you?”

It’s not exactly inconvenient for me. I was free as a bird tomorrow, and most probably Nagato was as well. So, it’s not inconvenient at all. At this rate, I’ll really be forced to go and see your heroics.

“That’s great, do come. Though it’s a friendly match, it is going to be a duel to the death. Tomorrow’s match would be the annual match between the American Football teams of my school and the neighboring boys school. The outcome of the match would affect how we spend the New Year. If we lose, we would be greeted by a hellish winter vacation. There will be no rest for us even in New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day. Everyday besides the regular practice, we’ll simply get more practice.”

Nakagawa sounded really serious, maybe even tragic. But for me it’s all none of my business. There was a mountainload of troublesome stuff I needed to take care of before the end of the year, and it’s only a few days before the snow mountain mansion field trip.

“Kyon, it’s fine if you’re busy. All you need to do is just bring Goddess Nagato over. That’s all that I ask of you. If she refuses, then I would truly give up. But as long as there’s a one-to-a-thousand chance, I’m willing to take it. If I don’t try, a dream would just be a dream,”

Yeah, you sure can talk big. Yet my weakness was my inability to say mean stuff,

“Alright then.”

I laid on my bed and sighed a breath that somehow never came out,

“I’ll call Nagato later.”

I have a feeling Nagato won't say "no",

"Where's your high school? If Nagato says OK, then I'll bring her over,"

Maybe I'll bring someone else as well… it's fine if I bring a few more people, right?

"Thank you, Kyon. I'll remember this debt I owe you,"

Nakagawa then cheerfully told me how to get to his school, and when the kickoff for the match would begin,

"You truly are a natural matchmaker! I'll have to hire you as our host for our wedding! No! I should name my first child after you…"

"Bye,"

After a cool farewell, I hung up the phone. If I let Nakagawa continue with his ramblings, I'm afraid holes would be bored out of my head already.

I placed the home phone receiver on my bed and picked up my cell phone, trying to look for Nagato's phone number in my address book.

And so, the next day came very quickly.

"You're too slow! How can the person who made the appointment be the last to arrive? Are you sure you even want to go!?"

Haruhi pointed at me with a smile on her face. The location was in front of the familiar station, which has become the official meeting point of the SOS Brigade. The other three - Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san were all waiting for me as well.

Originally, I had intended to just bring the silent Living Humanoid Interface along, but like I said, it just wasn't possible for the two of us to watch the game alone. No matter how tight a net is, it will always have holes. If the brigade commander were to find out we went without her, god knows what kind of weird punishment she would come up with. Just thinking about it was enough to give me shivers. I might as well drag the others along into this, so after calling Nagato, I proceeded to call the other three. As to why they all agreed, it could be either they just happened to have some free time, or they were just simply curious about this guy who fell in love with Nagato at first sight.

As it was in the middle of the chilly winter, everyone came wearing thick clothing. Asahina-san's outfit was worth a mention. Wearing that white artificial fur coat, which could either be furry or fluffy, she looked so cute, like an innocent white rabbit. If one were to fall in love at first sight, one's target ought to be Asahina-san instead.

As for Nagato, she simply wore a simple hooded coat over her uniform and placed the hood over her head. As expected from the alien created doll, she is able to resist such freezing Earth temperatures.

"…"

Though she was about to see the person who had confessed to her, she still remained expressionless.

"Alright, let's go. I can't wait to see what that guy looks like. Besides, this is my first time seeing an American Football game,"

Haruhi wasn't the only one in a good mood as though going to a picnic, Asahina-san was also smiling happily, Koizumi maintained his evil looking grin, and I looked unexcited, while our main character Nagato carried no expression whatsoever.

"I checked the bus routes around the park beforehand. It'll take about half an hour to get from here to that boy's school by bus. We can get on here,"

Koizumi led the way speaking like a tour guide as my words dwindled.

It's all fine as long as you're happy, whether it's this guy, Haruhi, or Asahina-san.

As Koizumi walked along, he gradually came close to my side and whispered meaningfully to my ear,

"To be honest, you sure do have a lot of extraordinary friends."

I waited for him to continue, yet Koizumi only gave me a grin and went back to his duties as a tour guide.

Nakagawa an extraordinary person? Who knows. To feel as though he's struck by lightning just by having one look at Nagato, he must be more extraordinary than the average person in order to have such special senses.

Walking to the bus depot, I just felt something was amiss.

For some reason, I just couldn't be happy.

After riding on the privately-operated bus for about half an hour, we walked for a few minutes before arriving at that boy's school. The game had already started.

As I had overslept, we had already missed two buses, so that by the time we arrived it was already fifteen minutes since the game had begun.

It didn't seem like we could enter the school grounds, so we walked along the perimeter, and very soon came to a field that was surrounded by a barbed fence. The American Football friendly match had already started.

"Wow~ Such a big school field,"

I totally agreed with Asahina-san's awestruck comment. Unlike the North High school field, which was basically a piece of flat land created from the leveling of a hill, a lot of money seems to to have been spent on building this very wide private boy's school sports field. Besides, the place where we were standing was about a story higher than the sports field, giving us a great vantage point. Apart from the five of us, there were some old geezers that would occasionally pass by, and plenty of schoolgirls, which I suspect to be fangirls, squeezing their faces on the wire fence, and cheering away in their high pitched voices for each boy's school.

Listening to the smashing sound of the white and blue jerseys and helmets, the five of us found an empty spot where we could stand alongside in a row.

Nagato remained speechless and didn't give any reaction.

Still silent…

I knew absolutely nothing about American Football. I remember after winning our match in the baseball tournament, Haruhi showed us the application posters for the American Football and soccer tournaments. In the end we entered neither tournament (of course that was after going through many trials and tribulations), but just to be safe, I still went and looked up the rules. It looked simple, but it was quite complicated. Though it wasn't hard to play, it wasn't a sport in which we could just join in if we felt like it.

In fact, just watching the bullfight beyond the fence proved that my choice not to participate was correct.

The offensive side carried an oval-shaped ball that looked like a rugby ball but not quite. In order to progress just one centimeter, the players would have to throw, pass, hold and charge forward simultaneously. In order to stop that ball from going one centimeter into their territory, the opposing defensive side would have to suddenly attack the opponent player holding the ball, struggling to take the ball away from him and obstruct their attacking formation. The sound of their protective pads clashing never stopped.

In general, it was a pretty American sport.

"Hmm…"

Haruhi clung to the barbed fence and looked intently at the players who were now clustered into a group,

“So, which one is Nakagawa?”

“The one with the number 82 on his back, the white team,”

I said according to the description Nakagawa told me. Nakagawa was the tight end, in which he’s positioned at the side of the offensive team’s line and was responsible for both blocking the defense and catching passes. Although Nakagawa is big, he’s also quick and agile. Hmm, he sure got the right position.

“Huh? Looks like the players could switch positions, why’s that?”

“Because the players are divided into the offensive and defensive teams. Nakagawa is in the offensive team.”

“They’re all wearing helmets, so can they attack using that? How hard can they smash into each other? Can they do Judo throws, or can they use any combat techniques?”

“They can use neither. There’s no such allowance, and they can’t use their helmets either.”

“Huh~?”

Haruhi looked keenly at the field. There was no American Football team in North High; if there was, this girl would definitely try to find a way to sneak in and wreak havoc. Who knows, she might just be able to achieve something using her instantaneous movement and explosive energy.

“This is such an exhilarating and enthusiastic sport. It’s very suitable for winter!”

I listened to Haruhi making her comments while quietly taking a glance at Nagato. She still maintained her empty expression, simply following the ball’s movement. To me, she didn’t seem to be really paying any particular attention to Nakagawa, but just simply daydreaming.

The five of us just stood there and spent some time watching guys from the boy’s schools smashing into each other.

“Um… would you like some tea?”

Asahina-san took a flask and some paper cups out from her bag,

“I thought it might be cold, so I prepared some warm drinks.”

The smiling Asahina-san was like an angel! I’m so grateful! It really was getting a bit chilly standing still while watching the game.

And so, we sipped on the excellent tea which was brewed by Asahina-san herself, and watched the American Footballers playing exuberantly in the middle of the chilly breeze.

Just as we were immersed in enjoying our tea while watching the game, the second quarter ended and the half-time break began. Dressed in white, Nakagawa's team gathered at the opposite end of the field. There stood a muscular man that seemed to be the coach yelling loudly at them. Though we couldn't see clearly, we could make out someone wearing a number 82 jersey amongst the team.

As for the match itself, if you really want my opinion, I thought it looked pretty dull. There were no elegant long passes, or running backs dashing for 30 yards across the length of the pitch. Both sides have managed to secure their first downs, and both sides have scored regularly so that the score was still pretty much level, with neither side managing to claim a decent advantage over their opponent.

However, I so happen to know someone who hates things that were dull and boring, and her name is Suzumiya Haruhi.

"I don't think there's any meaning to this at all,"

Standing in the same spot, Haruhi began to mumble. She wasn't alone in breathing out white vapor, as we were all doing the same.

"Those players are better off, at least they get to run around,"

Haruhi said while wrapping herself with her arms to stay warm,

"But it's just too cold for us who are just standing still. Is there a coffee shop nearby?"

The picnic mood seemed to have been blown away by the chilly wind, since Asahina-san's warm tea wasn't served ad infinitum and so we had run out of it quite some time ago now. Even before then, half of Asahina-san's trademark Warm Tea of Love had already been cooled down due to the cold wind, and so didn't do much to help keep the body warm. Not to mention that today saw the arrival of the first wave of a cold-front since winter began. Haruhi wasn't the only one shivering due to the cold, both Asahina-san and myself were frozen stiff as well. Nagato was probably the only person who didn't feel cold, as she feared neither hot nor cold.

"As expected, one can't experience any fun if they're just a spectator. Maybe I should join in and have some fun, I think I could be in charge of throwing the ball,"

Haruhi's bell-sized eyes were now squinted into thin lines thanks to the body-temperature snatching winds,

"Seriously, I'll freeze to death if I stop moving. Kyon, did you bring any good stuff? Like a thermal bag?"

If I had brought that, you think I wouldn't have used that already? If you must warm yourself up, why don't you do a marathon around the school or do some push-ups? It's economical and healthy at the same time.

"Hmph! Fine, since I already have a thermal bag here anyway, and it's a large one as well,"

Haruhi slowly wrapped her arms from behind Asahina-san and held her tiny little neck that looked so fragile as though it's about to break off.

"Kyaa! Wah! Wh… what are you doing?"

That voice of course came from the embarrassed Asahina-san.

"Mikuru-chan, you sure are warm. And soft as well,"

Burying her chin under the snow-like artificial fur on Asahina-san's coat, Haruhi glued herself to the back of Asahina-san and hugged the tiny figure of the upper classman which was well-endowed in one area.

"Just let me be for a while. Hee hee, Kyon, are you feeling envious?"

Of course I am. If I want to hug something so soft and warm, I might as well hug from the front.

"Hmm?"

Haruhi gave a jestful look,

"Does that mean…"

She seemed to want to say something, but then shut her mouth, and slowly inhaled softly,

"You want to do that to Mikuru-chan?"

I looked at Haruhi's mischievous face, and the wide-eyed face of Asahina-san, who was being wrapped tightly in Haruhi's iron grip. I began to think of an appropriate answer, as I was becoming preoccupied with endless thoughts, my lifeline arrived from behind,

"If you guys don't mind, why don't we hug each other?"

Perhaps wanting to join in our discussion, Koizumi carried a vulgar looking smile and gave his gross suggestion.

"Though running in a marathon is fine, I really don't mind having two guys hugging each other just to stay warm, you know."

But I do. I've said it many times already, I'm not interested in "the other side". Koizumi, all you needed to do is just quietly play your part as the commentator for the game. This is just between me, Nagato and Nakagawa. Your presence here is more or less irrelevant. I might as well say this, but Haruhi and Asahina-san's presence too was irrelevant.

I took a glance at the other side,

"That's not important…"

The important person present - Nagato - remained silent as ever, and simply looked at the field intently. She didn't even move a muscle. It felt as though her eyes were going after Nakagawa, but even I wasn't sure whether her gaze was focused on him.

On the other hand, Nakagawa was the same. As part of the offensive team, whether he was active on the field or resting on the sidelines, he never once looked over to this side. I went through so much trouble to bring Nagato here, and he ignores us completely. Even now, during the half-time intermission, he gathered with the other players in a circle discussing strategy. Has his passion for this game and his desire to win surpassed his pursuit of love?

Or maybe he's doing this on purpose? If what Nakagawa said was true, if he even takes one glance at Nagato, then he would quickly lose himself. I still think he was exaggerating things, but if he's telling the truth, then it'll definitely be bad for his game.

"Ah, whatever,"

I mumbled and looked at the back of Nagato's head, whose short hair fluttered in the wind.

I guess I'll wait till after this match when Nakagawa comes out of his school for him to meet Nagato. At this rate, if the second half goes smoothly and Nakagawa's team wins, then he'll be free as a bird.

Yesterday, Nagato said "I can see him," so it won't be bothersome to arrange for them to meet. Although I didn't want them to meet at all, I also didn't want to be a heartless person who would mercilessly deny other people's hopes and requests. This way I could at least ensure my ears can get some peace.

However…!

Unfortunately, things never quite go as one would expect. It was less than five minutes into the third quarter after the whistle signaling the resumption of the match when…

Nakagawa was hauled off in an ambulance.

Allow me to describe how that fellow managed to get himself wounded. Here is what happened:

The second half began with the opponent's turn on the offensive. Their running back had only managed to gain 20 yards and lost possession. Now it was Nakagawa's team's turn to go on the offensive.

Nakagawa was positioned on the edge near the scrimmage line which was tightly watched by both sides. Standing behind the white team's center, their quarterback seems to be making some signals to his teammates. Abruptly, Nakagawa moved from the front lines and towards the side, while at the same moment, carrying the ball, the quarterback retreated two to three steps. The opponent's defensive guards, cornerbacks and linebackers instantly charged forward like wild beasts.

Nakagawa sped up his pacing and cut into the hash marks, spun around and made a fake as though trying to receive a pass. The quarterback then nimbly threw the ball past Nakagawa toward the wide receiver, who was further downfield.

"Ah."

I wasn't sure whether it was Haruhi or Asahina-san that made that cry.

Like a spinning bullet, the ball didn't quite follow its intended trajectory. One of the opposition linebackers leapt forward, but could not quite intercept it. A turnover was barely avoided as the ball hit through his fingertips, but now the ball had changed course after being slowed down forcefully, falling toward a position no one had predicted.

It was in this moment!

I saw Nagato, the near immobile Buddhist statue, begin to make her move.

"…"

She placed her fingers on the edge of her hood and pulled it over, covering her face. But the hood did not cover her mouth, and so the sight of her lips chanting rapidly did not escape my attention.

"…"

Nagato was definitely chanting something very quickly.

I only saw this from the corner of my eye, as most of my attention was focused on the intense battle on the field.

"Whoa!"

I instinctively leaned forward, my eyes widening.

This was because I noticed the ball had changed direction, and it was falling toward the spot that Nakagawa was charging towards at an amazing pace. At the center of my gaze, Nakagawa made a dazzling leap, grabbed hold of the ball in mid air, and then attempted to make a safe landing…

…and failed.

At the same time as Nakagawa had leapt up, the opposing cornerback covering him also made a superb leap. He had only one target, and that was the ball which everyone on the pitch see as second only to their lives.

Like a long jump athlete, that cornerback jumped into the air after running for some distance, just as Nakagawa was reaching for the ball. As humans do not possess wings, they could not move around the air as freely as they might wish, and so after the cornerback jumped as strongly as he could, he subsequently went into free fall, crashing right into Nakagawa. The kinetic energy instantly went down to zero. Seeing how both players were flung backwards, one can imagine how huge the impact was.

The opposing cornerback spun 90 degrees and fell to the field on his back; the defenseless Nakagawa, however, spun forward beautifully and landed on his head.

"Wah?"

This exclamation came from Asahina-san who looked stunned.

I too gave a cry, as Nakagawa had landed in the worst possible way for a human being. Just like the victims of the Tombstone Piledriver, or the Inugami Clan, he landed with his head first. However, for the wrestler, there was a wrestling platform, for the victim of the Inugami Clan, he at least landed in a swamp, but for Nakagawa, the cold and hard ground received him.

(Yokomizo Seishi - Japanese detective fiction writer, best known for his Kindaichi Kosuke series. The later manga series, Kindaichi Case Files, stars Kindaichi Hajime, the grandson of Kosuke. In one of the Kindaichi Kosuke stories, Inugami Clan (Only Japanese wiki available) - The victim was found with his head buried in the swamp.)

The sound which I dreaded hearing came to our ears a beat after the image was transmitted to our eyes.

"Thud!"

It was good that he was wearing a helmet, otherwise judging from that loud thudding noise, I can bet that his skull would certainly be shattered.

The referee blew his whistle and stopped the match. Nakagawa lay there motionless. Nakagawa grabbed the ball tightly as though he was grabbing hold of some precious memento from his family and stopped moving… or rather, he didn't even move a single inch. The atmosphere was so tense it wasn't even funny.

“Is he alright?”

Haruhi asked with a stern look with her face over the fence.

“Wah~~,”

As though watching a gory scene from a horror movie, Asahina-san hid behind Haruhi’s shoulder,

“Ah, here comes the stretcher,”

She said in a worrying voice.

Surrounded by his teammates, Nakagawa was now carried up the emergency stretcher and brought away from the field. Despite this, his fingers still clung tightly onto the ball, his never-say-die attitude sure was admirable. If this battle casualty did not inspire Nakagawa’s teammates to victory, then I don’t believe anything else would.

Lying on the stretcher with his helmet taken off, Nakagawa’s situation wasn’t as bad as expected. He did respond to the cries from around him, and he nodded to every question that was asked. Though he tried to sit up but fell down again, at least he was still breathing.

“I guess it was a minor concussion,”

Koizumi attempts to explain the situation,

“I guess we don’t have to worry too much, as this sort of accident is common in this kind of sport.”

You’re not a doctor, and you’re standing so far away, so don’t act like a damn expert. It would be good if you were correct, but the head is very fragile, you know. The coach and consultant teacher seemed just as concerned as I was. A few moments later, the siren of the ambulance could be heard approaching.

“Your friend sure is unlucky,”

Haruhi said with a sigh,

“He wanted to make an impression in front of Yuki but instead got himself injured. I guess he was too eager that he didn’t expect things to go wrong.”

She seemed rather sympathetic to Nakagawa. Does she really want to arrange for Nakagawa and Nagato to be together? Then how come you were so quick to refuse the Computer Research Group President’s request to borrow Nagato?

After hearing me say that, Haruhi replied,

“Kyon, though I personally think love is a kind of disease, I’m not the sort to get in the way of people’s pursuit of romance just for the fun of it. After all, everyone’s view of happiness is their own,”

I wonder if Nagato should be considered lucky to be loved by Nakagawa?

“Though I may think a person is extremely unlucky, as long as that person thinks she is happy, then she must be happy,”

I shrugged my shoulders and allowed Haruhi’s romance philosophy in my left ear and out of my right. I’m sorry, if Asahina-san’s boyfriend turns out to be an absolute moron, even if Asahina-san’s happy with it, I’m not sure I would be able to wish them the best of luck. In fact, I might even try to stop their relationship from developing any further. But then, I’m sure no one would blame me.

“I hope your friend’s all right,”

Asahina-san said and placed her palms together in front of her fur coat. Her prayers looked genuine and were hardly pretentious. That’s the sort of nice person she is. With Asahina-san’s prayers, even if one were to suffer from bone fractures all over, he would definitely be healed in less than thirty minutes, so Nakagawa’s going to be fine.

Finally, the paramedics arrived and placed Nakagawa into the ambulance. They were so careful in handling the stretcher, it’s as though they were carrying a box marked “Fragile - Handle with Care”.

After placing Nakagawa inside the ambulance and shutting the doors, the sirens begin to sound once again. The ambulance drove off, with the red beacon on top slowly fading into the distance.

Nagato, who was five times more silent than usual today, stared at the departing ambulance with her obsidian-like eyes, as though trying to prove the existence of Redshift with her naked eyes.

So, now what?

Nakagawa’s show of affection for Nagato has been called off due to the unexpected withdrawal of its main star, and we have lost any interest in watching the resumed game all the way to the end anymore. As the weather was freezing, and the original objective was now non-existent, there was no longer any reason for us to remain here any longer, since our intended target had now been sent to the hospital.

“We can go to the hospital, too,”

Haruhi made the suggestion,

“If our intended target had gone to the hospital, if we follow him, we can continue this love story. After all, it would make perfect sense for Yuki to be worried and come pay him a visit. Your friend would be grateful as well. Besides, there’s heating inside the hospital, right? So what do you think of this idea?”

To be honest, Haruhi’s instant idea wasn’t bad at all, but I didn’t feel like going back to the hospital again. Ever since I met Haruhi, my psychological scars have been increasing.

“Don’t you care about your friend? Let me tell you this, when you were carried off in the ambulance, I was worried to death. But that’s only because we’re friends,”

Haruhi forcefully pulled my hand and said roughly,

“Besides, it was you who started all this trouble this time,”

Walking away from the field with me, Haruhi then stopped again,

“Oh yeah, which hospital did that ambulance go to?”

How the hell should I know?

“Let me check,”

Raising his hand, Koizumi smiled and accepted this task,

“Please wait for a while, it’ll take a minute or so,”

After turning his back to us and walking for a few steps, Koizumi pushed a few buttons on his phone and spoke softly, then listened to what the other side said. About a minute later, he hung up and walked towards us with a smile,

“I found out which hospital he was sent to,”

I have no idea which number he called to inquire, but I was pretty sure it wasn’t 119.

“It’s a hospital we’re all very familiar with. I’m sure you all know how to get there without me saying,”

A wave of rememberance came over me, my mind instantly thought of the monotonous dialog, the red apples, and the cheerful smile Koizumi had given me.

“Yes, it’s that one. The general hospital which you stayed in before,”

The one whose warden happens to be a friend of your uncle’s? I stared at Koizumi. This has got to be a coincidence, otherwise…

“It’s a coincidence,”

Noticing my alligator eyes, he began to giggle,

“No, it’s true, it really is a coincidence. I was surprised as well, honest.”

You don’t have to smile so cheerfully. This doesn’t change the fact that I still don’t trust you.

“Then, let’s all head to that hospital! Might as well call a taxi! Since there are five of us, if we divide it between ourselves, the fare ought to be cheap,”

Haruhi quickly began to take charge of the situation.

“Suzumiya-san, I think it’s about time we have a meeting for our coming field trip to the snow mountain. These two can take care of the visit, while you, Asahina-san and myself would stay behind to prepare for the trip, how about that? Because we have yet to sort out the departure date, what luggage to bring and other minor details. We won’t have much time if we don’t take care of these soon.”

But after hearing Koizumi’s suggestion, Haruhi remained hesitant,

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes,”

Koizumi continued his persuasion,

“It’s almost New Year’s Eve. Organizing a New Year’s activity in the snow mountain mansion is a major event. I had wanted to gather the SOS Brigade to meet for the winter field trip today, but I didn’t expect this extra event in our itinerary,”

Well, sorry about that.

“Oh no, I don’t mean to blame you at all. On the contrary, I should be the one who’s apologizing. I’ll leave Nagato-san in your hands, so please hurry up and go meet with Nakagawa-san in the hospital. As to what to do there, I’ll let you decide the best course of action. I would wait at the usual coffee shop with Suzumiya-san and Asahina-san, you can come there after the visit… Is that fine with you, Suzumiya-san?”

Haruhi remained silent for a while and then said with a frown,

“Hmm, you’re right. I wouldn’t be much help going to the hospital. And Kyon’s friend is only interested in Yuki anyway,”

She looked extremely reluctant,

“Alright, Kyon, you can go visit your friend with Yuki. If he could write such a love letter, he would probably be dancing like wild after looking at Yuki for five seconds.”

After that, Haruhi pointed at me and said with a pouting look,

“But remember to report everything in detail to me afterwards! You hear?”

And so, we all took a bus back to our gathering spot. From there, we split into two parties. Nagato and I would ride another bus to the private hospital, while the remaining three would continue to be regular customers of the nearby coffee shop.

Nagato never turned her head around once as we parted ways, but I suddenly had an urge to look back. I saw Haruhi and the others also turning around and looking at us, and Haruhi was also making some sign language with her arms as they went further and further. I didn’t delve into what she was implying with that strange body language as I turned back to look at my companion, who had buried herself inside her thick hooded coat.

How should I put this…

To put it simply, the inquiries I had were now wrapped tightly around my heart like barnacles. The first question concerns Nakagawa, who had fallen in love with Nagato at first sight. Why was it that he happened to get injured in the game? The second was in regard to what Koizumi had said to me back at the gathering spot, “You sure do have a lot of extraordinary friends”. I was particularly bothered by that word “extraordinary”. I would readily admit that I have no friends that possess any weird characteristics; if there were any, then it would have to be Koizumi. Just what did he mean when he said Nakagawa was “extraordinary”?

Another point that cannot be ignored was the mysterious incantation Nagato made. Nakagawa’s accident happened just after Nagato had recited her spell. Even a dull person, as long as he has memory of such events, would be able to link these two together. As someone who could make a stand-in batter like me make three consecutive home runs, Nagato was capable of doing such a thing.

“…”

Nagato buried her face within the hood of her coat and said nothing, but very soon the answer would be revealed.

Upon inquiring at reception, we learned that Nakagawa had completed his treatment and had been transferred to his ward. Though his injury was minor, he still needed to be hospitalized for further observation. I walked with Nagato, who followed me like a ghost possessing its host, and entered the corridor leading towards the ward that the receptionist had indicated.

After a few steps, we had arrived before the ward. Nakagawa was staying in a six-person room.

“Nakagawa, you okay?”

“Hey Kyon!”

My former classmate wore a light blue hospital gown and was lying on the bed. Nakagawa’s face looked vaguely familiar to me; he still has his crew cut. He sat up straight like a panda who just woke up from his nap.

“You came just in time, I just finished my treatment. The doctor said I still need to stay for one night just to make sure. I probably injured my neck when I fell, that was why I felt like throwing up. Fortunately the doctor said it was just a minor concussion. I gave the coach a call as well, telling him I would be out by tomorrow, so they don’t need to come and see me…”

As he seems immersed in talking non-stop, he suddenly noticed the ghost that was standing behind me, and his eyes widened as a result,

“I, is that… c, could it possibly be…”

It’s not possibly, it’s definitely,

“This is Nagato. Nagato Yuki. I thought it’d cheer you up, so I brought her along.”

“Ahhhh…!”

“I’m Nakagawa!”

He roared as he introduced himself,

“Naka as in Nakahara Chuya, and Gawa as in Kawamura (note: the “k” in kawa becomes hardened to a “g” when preceded with another word in front so it’s not a typo)! My name is Nakagawa! I wish to be friends with you!”

He said reverentially like a daimyo meeting his shogun for the first time.

“Nagato Yuki.”

Without any cheerfulness in her voice, she plainly reported her name. She didn’t take off her hooded coat, she even kept her hood on her head. I couldn’t take it any longer, so I flicked that hood that was covering her face over to her back. After coming all the way to see him, it’d be a pity if she left without even showing her face.

Nagato remained silent, but simply stared at Nakagawa, who was looking stunned. After about ten seconds,

“Huh? …Ah~”

Nakagawa was the first to change his expression, he gave a surprised look,

“You’re… Nagato-san, right?”

“Yes.” Nagato replied.

“Were you the one that Kyon walked with early in spring this year…?”

“Correct.”

“The one that often goes to the supermarket before the station…?”

“Correct.”

“Really… is that so…”

Nakagawa’s face became sullen. I would have thought he would cry tears of joy or would be so moved that he would faint, but it was neither. Instead the atmosphere was now becoming unexpectedly stiff.

Nagato was now looking at Nakagawa with eyes that seemed to be observing the immobile flatfish in an aquarium; at the same time I also noticed that Nakagawa was looking at Nagato as though staring at a manhole cover on the road.

These two individuals had gotten into a staring battle all of a sudden. Very soon, one of them showed signs of frailty. As expected, Nakagawa was the first to move his eyes away.

“…Kyon,”

Though Nakagawa spoke softly, I guess the other patients in the ward could all hear him clearly, but only I could see him moving his fingers discreetly, gesturing me to come over to him.

“What is it?”

“There’s something… er, I need to talk about it with you alone. So… could you please… ask…”

Seeing as how he kept looking at Nagato, I understood at once. He wanted to tell me something, but didn’t want Nagato to hear it.

I turned towards Nagato…

“Is that so?”

There was no way the two of them could be telepathically linked, yet Nagato gracefully turned, walking out of the ward at the pace of a luggage conveyor belt.

Once the door was shut, Nakagawa breathed a sigh of relief,

“That girl… is that really Nagato-san? Is that her?”

I don’t think I’ve had the fortune to encounter Nagato’s imposter yet. Though I’ve seen her behaving in a completely different way before, but that’s all in the past now.

“You should be happy,” I said, “Your future bride ten years from now has come to see you, can’t you at least pretend to be moved?”

“Umm… hmmmm,”

Nakagawa mumbled and nodded his head,

“That’s Nagato-san… alright. No doubt about it. That was neither a twin sister nor a doppelganger.”

What the hell are you trying to say? Don’t go telling me that she isn’t Nagato just because she isn’t wearing glasses. Haven’t you seen Nagato recently yourself? Nagato had already heeded my request back then and stopped wearing glasses since. I’m not accepting any lame excuse like you having a fetish for glasses and so can’t accept Nagato now, I’m telling you.

“No, that’s not it!”

Nakagawa lifted his head, his face looked troubled,

“I don’t know how to say this… please let me think, Kyon. I’m sorry…”

Nakagawa then sat on the bed and began groaning. Has he bumped his brains out after all? His reaction was totally unexpected. There was no point talking to him. No matter what I said, he would just reply with an “hmm”, as though trying to think seriously on something. In the end, he even clutched his head as though having a headache. I didn’t have the patience to play with him forever, so I decided to leave the ward,

“Nakagawa, I’ll have to ask you for the details later. I can’t give her a reasonable reply like this…”

My report for Haruhi would have to wait as well. If I told her what had happened, she would simply glare at me.

Exiting the ward, I found Nagato leaning against the wall waiting for me. Her dark bead-like eyes turned towards me, and then turned to the floor.

“Let’s go,”

Nodding her head slightly, Nagato resumed her role as my personal ghost and obediently walked behind me.

Just what was going on?

Like a tiger beetle, I walked ahead of Nagato, who remained silent all along, and hurried towards the bus stop.

The scene that followed at the coffee shop was a scene most of you are familiar with. Haruhi laid out her plans for the winter vacation and chattered away, Koizumi nodded with mechanical efficiency, Asahina-san slowly sipped her Darjeeling tea, I wore the look of being at a loss on what to do, while Nagato played her role of the silent listener without any opinions from beginning to end.

The bill was evenly divided amongst us in the end, and so today’s SOS Brigade activity had come to a conclusion. When I arrived home, what awaited me was…

“Kyon-kun! You came back just in time, you’ve got a phone call…”

My sister held out the cordless phone in one hand, while she carried Shamisen with her other arm and smiled at me. I received both the phone and Shamisen and proceeded to enter my room.

As expected, that call was from Nakagawa.

“I really don’t know how to say this…”

For everyone’s information, this call was made from the hospital’s pay-phone. Nakagawa’s voice indeed revealed something that seemed hard to say,

“Can you please relay a message, that I would like to cancel my wedding appointment?”

He sounded like one of those medium to small-sized corporate presidents begging for a postponement in payment of their ever increasing debts.

“Care to tell me why?”

While I sounded like a creditor in a very bad mood towards a hapless business owner,

“You went to describe your dream of living together as a happy couple all on your own, and now you’re saying you want to give up after just one day? Then what was the meaning of all this

yearning for these past few months? You're saying you've changed your mind after meeting Nagato? If you don't give me a very good reason, you can forget about me relaying the message for you."

"I'm sorry. I'm not even sure I understand myself…"

Nakagawa's apology seemed sincere…

"When she rushed to the hospital to see me, I was very happy and grateful that she did. But unlike before, Nagato-san this time didn't have those illuminated rings or aura about her. She just seemed like a normal girl one would find anywhere in the streets. No, she was a normal girl no matter how I looked at her. As to why she became like that, even I find it hard to explain."

My mind came up with Nagato making an expression that says, life is unpredictable.

"Kyon, since then I've been thinking seriously, and have finally come to a conclusion. I was deeply in love with Nagato-san in the past, but now I don't feel any affection towards her. That means I must have got it wrong in the first place."

What do you mean you got it wrong?

"I made a mistake. It wasn't love at first sight. Now that I think about it, there's no such thing as love at first sight. And yet I've been mistaken, thinking that's what my feeling was."

Okay. Then what were your claims of having seen Nagato engulfed in a white angelic halo, and going through a feeling of being struck by lightning all about? How do you explain the amazing fact that you would be frozen stiff at the sight of Nagato?

"I really don't know,"

Nakagawa's voice sounded so apologetic that he sounds as though he was begging for the weather forecast for the next hundred years,

"I haven't got a clue. The only explanation I can think of is that it has all been a hallucination…"

"Oh really?"

Though I sounded rude, I didn't intend to blame Nakagawa at all. In fact, I wasn't surprised. Because things didn't go beyond my expectations. When I first heard Nakagawa rave about his delusions, I had already guessed what this was all about.

"Alright, Nakagawa. I'll relay the message for Nagato. I'm sure she wouldn't be too disappointed, since she never really gave a thought to you in the first place. She'll probably forget about you in an instant."

I could hear a breath of relief through the phone.

“Really? If that’s true, then thank goodness. Otherwise I really wouldn’t know how to apologize to her. My nerves must have gone haywire back then.”

That has to be it. There’s no doubt about it, Nakagawa’s nerves weren’t functioning properly at all back then. But they’re all back to normal now. Someone must have cast a restoration spell on him, perhaps?

I then had a short chat with Nakagawa, until his phone card was running out of credit, and we said goodbye. It was good that way, as we may yet meet again.

After hanging up, I quickly called another number,

“Are you free to come out now?”

I arranged a time and location for the person on the other side of the phone, then picked up my scarf and coat. Shamisen, who was lying sprawled out on my coat, got rolled off onto the carpet where he looked at me with a scowl.

After a busy day yesterday, today, which was just as hectic, was soon coming to an end.

I pedaled on my bike and headed towards that holy ground for peculiar people, the park in front of the station near Nagato’s apartment complex. Nagato had called me out to meet her there back in the beginning of May. When I traveled with Asahina-san back in time to Tanabata three years ago, I also woke up in that place. And recently, when I went back in time for the second time, I was sitting right there with the grown-up version of Asahina-san. All these past memories came flooding back to my head.

I rode near the entrance of the park and parked my bike there, and then walked towards the park.

Sitting on the park bench full of memories waiting for me was a person wrapped in a hooded coat like one of those Jawas. Under the illumination of the street lamp, she looked as though she had emerged from the darkness itself.

“Nagato,”

I said to the little figure that was looking at me,

“Sorry for calling you out all of a sudden. It’s just like what I told you over the phone, Nakagawa’s changed his mind.”

Nagato stood up naturally and nodded her head slightly, she then said,

“I see.”

I gazed at Nagato's pitch black eyes,

"Isn't it time you tell the whole truth now?"

As I came rushing over by bike in the fastest speed possible, my body still felt warm, so I could still stand like this in the middle of a chilly night for a little longer,

"I can understand Nakagawa falling in love with you at first sight, since everyone has their preferences. But the way he changed his mind today was just too unnatural. Not to mention after today's game… after Nakagawa got injured and was sent to hospital, all the affection he had for you had disappeared, so I'm guessing that his injury was not a coincidence,"

"…"

"Were you pulling any strings? I know you did something during the match. It was you who let Nakagawa get injured, right?"

"Yes."

After replying swiftly, Nagato lifted her head to face me, and then said,

"The one whom he had fallen for was not me."

Her tone was so plain it sounds like she's reciting an essay,

"What he had seen was not me, but the Integrated Data Sentient Entity instead."

I silently listened, while Nagato continued in the same expressionless tone,

"He had the extra-sensory ability to interact with the Integrated Data Sentient Entity using me as an interface."

I could feel the cold wind biting my ears.

"However, he did not understand what he had just seen. Humans are organic lifeforms after all, and are thus on a totally different recognition level from the Integrated Data Sentient Entity."

…"A glowing aura behind her back… as holy and pure as the heavens shining upon the earth…" That was what Nakagawa had said.

Nagato continued her explanation without showing any emotions,

"He must have seen the culmination of aeons of knowledge that has transcended time and space. Even though the data that he had extracted from the interface was very insignificant, it was enough to overwhelm him."

And that was why he got it wrong… right? I looked at Nagato's messy hair and sighed. The "inner character" that Nakagawa felt was merely just a part of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. While I didn't completely understand it, Nagato's boss is a powerful existence that possesses an enormous history and knowledge well beyond the grasp of humanity. It now became clear why Nakagawa, who had accidentally stumbled upon this knowledge, became so disoriented. It's just like unwittingly opening an attachment that carries a malicious program, eventually your computer would be hijacked and there is nothing you can do about it.

"So that's why Nakagawa would mistakenly think that he had fallen in love?"

"Correct."

"So… you decided to amend his feelings during the football game?"

In place of a spoken reply, the messy haired bowl head nodded and then said,

"I analyzed the powers that he possesses, and then had them deleted."

Nagato continued,

"The capacity of a human brain is too small to connect with the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. I foresaw that he would continue to behave in such a way if left unattended."

This I understood. Putting aside Nakagawa's reaction of going into a trance upon seeing Nagato, just the fact that he has waited for nearly half a year before telling me his plans for the next ten years was proof that his brain has been short circuited. If he was allowed to go on like that, who knows how crazy he would get. I shuddered just thinking about it.

Yet, there was something else I didn't understand.

"Why did Nakagawa have such powers? Was he born with the ability to see the Integrated Data Sentient Entity through you?"

"He probably began possessing such powers three years ago."

Three years ago again? The reason Nagato, Asahina-san and Koizumi are here was all because of something that happened three years ago. Or to be precise, something Haruhi caused to happen…

At this point, I realized one thing.

The extra-sensory ability that Nagato had mentioned. If that's what it was… I get it now. Who knows, Nakagawa could probably be a back-up esper to Koizumi. In spring three years ago, Haruhi indeed did something. She caused a temporal faultline to appear, created a data explosion, and gave birth to espers around the world. If that's the case, then it wouldn't be surprising if Nakagawa were to replace Koizumi as the esper by her side. Koizumi's enigmatic sentence now made perfect sense. Whether he already knew, or just happened to find out about it these past

two days, that fellow must have realized Nakagawa possessed some semi-esper powers. That was why he implied that I had a lot of "extraordinary" friends.

"It is possible." Nagato said.

Or it could be… I felt a shiver that had nothing to do with cold weather. Not everything can be traced back to that single incident three years ago. Haruhi might still have the ability to influence other people in a supernatural way even now. Just like allowing the cherry blossoms to bloom in autumn, turning all the pigeons' feathers in the shrine to white overnight. She's still spreading her influence to the people around her to this day.

"…"

Nagato stood there motionless without answering me, or maybe she has said everything she wanted to say and began to walk off. She slowly went past me, who was also standing motionless, and began to go back into the darkness, like a wandering ghost about to ascend into the realm beyond…

"Wait, can I ask you just one more question?"

Nagato's silhouette gave me an impression that was hard to describe, I instinctively called and stopped her.

Claiming to fall in love with Nagato at first sight, and coming up with an extremely embarrassing love letter, Nakagawa was, according to my knowledge, the first person to declare his love for Nagato. After hearing me recite his wedding proposal yesterday, what was going on in her mind? Someone came to declare his sincere love for you, telling you "I love you, let's make a happy future together", but after a whole day, it turns out that he was just mistaken. Just how did you feel about that?

The questions in my heart finally formed into words and came out of my mouth,

"Don't you find it a pity?"

In the past few months since we met, I've shared many memories with Nagato. Though I've also shared memories with Haruhi, Asahina-san and Koizumi, I found that I've experienced more events with Nagato in particular. In fact, every situation seems to involve her. I might as well mention this, she's probably the only person to cause the bell within me to shake the most vigorously. No matter what happens, Haruhi would always find a way out, Asahina-san only needs to remain as herself, while Koizumi can go to hell for all I care, but…

I finally couldn't resist asking a question which I've been dying to ask,

"When you realized that his confession was all just a misunderstanding, did you feel any pity about it?"

"…"

Nagato stopped, and sort of turned her face towards me. A sudden wind blew by and covered Nagato's face with her hair.

The night wind was so cold as though it could slice off my ears. After waiting for a while, a tiny voice travelled through the wind and into my ears,

"…A little bit."

Where did the Cat Go?

The end of the year is creeping up on us in the middle of the winter break. Originally we expected to be looking forward to Koizumi and his merry men's detective game production; however on the very day that we had arrived at Tsuruya-san's villa, we found ourselves lost inside that strange house that was seemingly a mere daydream. This event led to a state of emergency with Nagato having fainted on the ski slopes and Haruhi screaming and yelling over it.

Fortunately Nagato's health has returned after coming back to normal space. No matter how I put it, this has been one very hectic day. The date on the calendar is still the thirtieth of December, a day before New Year's Eve.

Come tomorrow - which is New Year's Eve…

The project, long in planning, is going on as planned. That project is simply the surprise activity that busybody Koizumi will host, really unnecessary: the winter version of that messed up detective game. The only difference compared to the last game is that we know from the beginning that this is merely a game and that it is at the heart of the whole co-ed experience. As for the disaster on the snow mountain, that mirage of a mansion, the fake all-nude Asahina-san, some principle of Mr. Euler and Nagato out cold with a high fever, this was all just an unanticipated prelude. That incident wasn't Haruhi's style, and I really want to have a word with the nameless perpetrator. Although Nagato fell, at least Koizumi and I — it is debatable as to whether or not Asahina-san (small) contributed at all — had managed to somehow get us through the maze.

Right now in this villa, we also have Tsuruya-san, who doesn't seem to be the average person, as well as Koizumi's associates, which would become an even more unnatural circumstance should I overlook them.

Finally, in a very SOS Brigade-esque… no, I should say very Haruhi-esque fashion, we can finally proceed ahead as planned with the extra-curricular activities.

Concern about how this year would end lingers on in my head and won't go away. It seems that only I have that question, so I better keep my mouth shut as I'm in the minority.

Let us verify the cast for this act: there is myself, Haruhi, Nagato, Asahina-san, Koizumi, Tsuruya-san, my sister, Shamisen, Mori-san, Arakawa-san, as well as Tamaru Keiichi-san, and his brother Yutaka-san.

Haruhi proposed that the sequel to the Mystery Tour should begin as soon as possible.

On New Year's Eve, after finishing the breakfast prepared by Mori-san and Arakawa-san, we start by gathering on a raised public meeting space on the ground floor of Tsuruya-san's estate.

This area is as large as at least 20 tatamis and all covered with cypress wood flooring, similar to a wooden stage made for speech-making or to put on a drama. There are eight sunken hearths that comfortably seat eight individuals each. Of course, the floor also has heating and a warm breeze comes from an efficient electric heater, all of which keeps people in the public area and the walkway really cozy.

Looking out of the window, the sky above the ski slopes is about as bright as the kind of uniform blue you get when someone sprays blue paint over a polyester board, but today skiing is prohibited.

“I am still a bit worried about Yuki, so let’s stay indoors today.”

With that, Haruhi proclaims the skiing ban. Nagato has been using her expressionless look to try and convince Haruhi, who wants to drag her off to see a doctor, that ‘I am all right’, but there is no one that can reverse the decision made by our own chief.

“Hear this! No outing at least for today! Before I am sure that you have fully recovered, any contact sport or anything that might get adrenaline pumping are not for you, okay?”

Nagato looks at the eyes of Haruhi, which are as wide as the moon, and then turns her vision towards the rest of us lined up on the side. It is almost as if she is asking ‘I am fine with this, but how about you?’

It seems that there is more than one person that shares Haruhi’s sentiment.

“I wholeheartedly agree. We would be worried if we were to leave Nagato-san aside while the rest of us go out. All for one and one for all… it might make for quite a tale,”

Koizumi crisply responds. The non-full members, being my sister and Tsuruya-san, both readily agree. I don’t know why it is that I can’t be sure of Shamisen’s opinion, who my sister is carrying right now, but he didn’t even make a sound, so I assume he has no comment.

“Why don’t we push the schedule ahead then?” Koizumi’s vision heads out of the window. “It’s fine to have the detective game, originally set to start this evening and end at midnight, start early.”

Can we begin now? Please do this before Haruhi’s burning eyes, glimmering in anticipation, start to roast my nerve cells.

“I apologize, but it is best to wait until snow starts to drift again. The weather forecast suggests that it will snow in the afternoon so please wait until then.”

I had only dragged that ridiculously heavy Shamisen along because you’re the one who said that a cat is required. Now you say that you need to have it snowing. What is this? If you want snow, there’s a pile of the stuff outside.

“I need a condition of non-stop snowfall. Ahh, I cannot go on any further, for it is a part of the deception.”

Having said that, Koizumi smiles at the bright calico in my sister’s arms and grabs the hiking backpack next to the heater.

“Having anticipated such a situation, I have brought several games with me, which should be enough to keep everyone busy even for an entire day.”

I expected something like this, but with him taking out one board game after the other, I wonder if Koizumi simply detests video games?

We can really enjoy ourselves, but what of Mori-san and Arakawa-san? Arakawa, the butler who doubles as head chef and the ever busy maid Mori-san who has been constantly tending to our needs are both actually members of the ‘Organization’ that Koizumi is a part of, tasked to keep an eye on Haruhi.

The demeanor of the two is so reserved that I feel rather apologetic about it. Just as I was about to lend them a hand with the cooking as well as with the cleaning duties —

“There is no need. I sincerely thank you for your goodwill.”

The demure pair politely rejected my offer.

“These are duties within our competence and are our responsibility.”

Eh? Are the two of them actually butler and maid in real life? Were they hired by Koizumi and his cohorts to come here just to put on a show?

Perhaps seeing my concern, Arakawa-san removed the professional mask and put a full smile on his face.

“Our appearance is all due to having gone through professional training,”

He explained to me. At the moment, the two are nowhere to be seen in this public area and are probably busy in the kitchen.

As for the other two actors — Tamaru Keiichi-san who had made his vast fortune that affords him a lone island as a summer resort from the field of biotechnology, along with his brother Yutaka-san — they have yet to appear. Their arrival will mark the climax of Haruhi’s career in the field of tabletop games. The nerve-wrecking tradition that is to be the after-meal exercise and uses punishment games as the bet is set to begin by two o’clock in the afternoon. Meanwhile Haruhi is becoming a billionaire as the rest of us fall knee-deep in debt.

The two guests are led to the public area by Arakawa-san, who went out to greet them, and they chat with us a little.

“If not for the train delay due to the snow, we would have arrived in the morning.”

Tamaru Keiichi-san, who appears to be an ordinary uncle no matter how you look at him, has as warm a smile as in the summer.

“Ahh, hello everyone, it’s been a while.”

Tamaru Yutaka-san, the sunshine boy, shows an exaggerated smile to Koizumi as he waves to us, and then addresses Tsuruya-san:

“Hi, my name is Tamaru, pleased to meet you, and thank you for your hospitality. To be invited to the Tsuruya family’s retreat is an honor.”

“Not at all, don’t be so modest!”

Tsuruya-san happily continues:

“You are all friends of Koizumi-kun and with the entertainment that you’ve all prepared, I am more than happy about everything! I love a good show!”

No matter who she talks to, Tsuruya-san seems to have a way of turning the other person into a friend in about fifteen seconds. She must be like that in Asahina-san’s class. I am quite envious of the male students in that class.

Mori-san and Arakawa-san greet the Tamaru brothers once again.

“We welcome your arrival, dear guests.”

“Sorry to trouble you all even in winter.” Keiichi-san gives an awkward smile. “Thanks for everything, Arakawa.”

“Have you all had lunch by now?”

Mori-san inquires with a smile. Yutaka-san replies.

“We already ate on the train. Please bring our luggage to our rooms.”

“Of course, please leave it to me.”

Arakawa-san returns a deep bow as he suddenly gives Koizumi a look.

“Well then, everyone,”

Koizumi stands up like the the priest in a marriage ceremony-

“With everyone so anxious to start, let us begin the game. Of course that might be an inconvenience to the Tamaru brothers who have just arrived.”

His smile seems a little stiff. Could it be that Koizumi lacks confidence with the game arrangements or that some awkward situation is awaiting us?

“Let me state that the only victim will be Keiichi-san. This will not become a serial murder case. And there is only one murderer so please rule out the possibility of multiple suspects. As for motivation… you can ignore it as there is no meaning in that. Lastly, once we start setting the stage-” He points to the clock of the wall, “-which should begin between two and three in the afternoon, save Arakawa-san and Mori-san, no other person may leave this public area for the duration. Yutaka-san is to stay here as well. If there is anything that needs to be attended to before we begin, please see to it now. Can all of you abide by those rules?”

Everyone nods.

“There are still seven minutes till two o’clock, but that’s not a problem. Let us begin.”

Koizumi gives a nod to Tamaru Keiichi-san.

“Well then-”

Keiichi scratches his head with an awkward look, as he is once again the center of attention, repeating the role of the victim as in the summer. He stands up and then talks to us as if he is baiting us:

“I suppose that my room is the small hut outside the main house.”

“Yes, please follow me,” Mori-san says.

“I would like to take a little nap. Having to wake up so early this morning left me sleep deprived. I might also have caught a cold, as my nose is acting up.”

“Oh yes, Keiichi-san is allergic to cats. This might have been caused by the cat.”

Even for an act, this is getting too carried away.

“Might be. Ahh, don’t worry too much about it. My cat allergy is not all that serious. It is a pain to be in a small room, but it isn’t much of a problem if we are in a wide open space.”

After that he gives a reminder:

“Oh yes, can you come and wake me at about four-thirty? Is that ok? At four-thirty?”

“Of course.”

Mori-san bows, then stands up straight and elegant as she walks out.

“Please follow me. This way.”

Hurrying to catch up to Mori-san, Keiichi-san disappears into the hallway after having spewed out a whole bunch of long-winded lines. The whole interlude screams, “All’s right with the world!”

“I will take my leave then. Yutaka-san, I will help you with the luggage.”

Arakawa-san the butler gives a full ninety-degree bow and quickly leaves with the bag and coat.

Having seen them all off with his eyes, Koizumi faked clearing his throat:

“With that, scene one has come to an end. Please enjoy yourselves on this wide-open floor.”

“Hold it,”

Haruhi objects.

“What’s with the hut? Where is it if it exists?”

“Oh yeah,” Tsuruya-san responds, “it was not built with the house, it’s just a very small extension. Eh? Did none of you spot it?”

“Not at all. Koizumi-kun, to hide any lead is against the rules. Not telling us is just not fair. Let’s all go and take a look.”

“I had planned to take everyone there later on…”

Koizumi’s smile is rather forced with how fast the pacing of things has become. However there seems to be room to salvage the situation after he has a look at the clock.

“I understand. It’s not a problem to go and have a look right now.”

“Over here!”

Tsuruya-san heads out in the lead. Everyone else naturally follows. Even my sister has come along while hugging Shamisen. Although I don’t really think that the girl and the cat will be of any help with the deduction.

Just beyond the public area is a walkway ending on the central courtyard. The exterior wall is glass, and so the view of the courtyard outside is crystal-clear.

I don’t know exactly when, snow had begun to drift from the sky.

The accumulated snow was already knee-deep. The landscaping is Japanese in style and it’s only because of the snowfall that it seems to be totally white everywhere. Within this white scene, a small building that looks to be a hut stands by itself.

After a short walk, Tsuruya-san opens the door leading to the courtyard and points to the building.

“That is the hut that my grandfather uses to meditate. He hates noise and in order to escape from the clamors of the villa, he locks himself inside whenever we come here on vacation. Don’t come if you don’t like the noise! But it’s odd not to invite him. He’s a tough old geezer to please.”

Tsuruya-san might be complaining about it, but her tone is filled with a sense of longing as well.

I carefully observe every detail without overlooking anything. There is no solid wall anywhere on the passage between the door from the villa to the hut. Only the roof keeps out the snow. Thanks to that, the stone path from the house to the small hut is covered by snowflakes. Thank goodness that there’s only light snowfall today as things won’t be so good in a blizzard.

The subzero air that blows in from the wide open door freezes us without any jacket to death, especially Shamisen who is struggling about in a bad mood as he wants to get back to his warm bed. My sister finds Shamisen in this mood to be highly amusing, and before I can stop her, she heads out of the walkway after putting on her slippers and pushes Shamisen close to the piles of snow.

“Hey, Shami, this is snow. Want to eat it?”

Shami shakes about like a carp trying to break free from the fishing wire, and the moment that he gets free of my sister’s arms, he gives a ‘umeow~’ in a show of his own dissatisfaction and storms back to the house, vanishing without a trace. No doubt he is going back onto the heated floor to continue with his sleep.

“Ara.”

Mori-san, after having led Keiichi-san to his room, comes toward us on the stone pavements with a movement so light it’s as if she’s weightless. This beauty of age unknown gives us a charming smile.

“Is there something that I can help you all with? If you need to find Keiichi-sama, he would be inside the hut.”

“You sure?” Haruhi questions with her face showing a sceptical look.

“I am positive.” Koizumi answers instead. “That is because the script is set up this way.”

When we return to the public area, the clock points exactly to two o'clock. Koizumi sighs apparently in relief.

"Allow me to remind everyone not to leave on your own before three o'clock. If you have to do so, please allow me to escort you."

Koizumi walks to the bag over in the corner and starts to take things out of it. Why not just take everything out at once?

"Hmm?"

I notice something. Shamisen is nowhere to be seen. Koizumi has placed things over by the heater, and the cushion that is placed over the heat vent is the preferred seating of the cat. I thought that he'd be laying there still by this point. Although this concern-

"Let's play this to pass the time. Is that alright, Suzumiya-san?"

vanishes without a trace with Koizumi's comments.

"Sure." Haruhi seems to be in high spirits for some reason. "It might be a bit early, but we'd be playing later on anyway, so might as well. Koizumi-kun, gimme that."

Haruhi grabs a paper bag from Koizumi and takes out some strange things from it, a few pieces of paper that might be for sketching and the same number of envelopes. I suddenly feel a sense of anxiousness that is kind of hard to describe.

"This is Fukuwarai." Says Haruhi. "Did you all play it when we were kids? This is meant for tomorrow, but it would be a waste of time to not play it right now."

This is obvious just from the looks of the setup. Be it the facial features or the hairline, all of these are cute versions of our portraits. The outlines are actually very true to the original, quite identifiable even without facial features such as eyes or nose. That could be the reason why Haruhi's so very smug right now.

"This is my work. I did it myself! And it's all done by hand. There's even one for Tsuruya-san. I even did one for for your sister knowing that she's coming along. Sorry about that Yutaka-san ~ I don't have much of an impression of your face…"

"No worries." Yutaka-san sounds quite relaxed about it. "It is natural for you not to have much of an impression of my look."

"I suppose."

Haruhi looks at us members with a smile.

“Not bad huh? We can play the game with our faces. But let me tell you that there’s no going back. The faces when they’re done will be glued and put to display in the clubroom, so you better take this seriously or the portraits that will be put to display for generations to see will be some cubist impressionist work.”

Her head is always thinking of the silliest things. Well Haruhi’s got quite the artistic talent, with her capturing our features really well. If we put the pieces together right, it should be easy to identify these as our caricatures. That point alone means that we can’t let Haruhi down.

However, just how does she find the kind of time to do this stuff?

“Who wants to start first?”

Tsuruya-san bravely raises her hands the moment Haruhi asks that question.

Tsuruya-san, while she does not seem to be an average person, has no x-ray vision. After having been blindfolded by a towel, she arranges a laugh riot of a portrait beautifully and makes the room catch infectious laughter, which of course drives her to hilarity having seen the final results as she tosses about on the ground. Not even with laugh bags can you crack up like that.

The second-up is Koizumi. His handsome face is ruined in an instant. After having taken off his shroud and getting a look at his final works, he shakes his head with innumerable woes, but knowing that I come next makes me unable to really laugh about it.

What a game this is, making me feel butterflies in my stomach. As I mentally prepare myself-

“Pardon me for a second.” Koizumi whispers to me. “I need to talk to Arakawa-san and the others about tomorrow’s arrangements, so I will excuse myself for now.”

With that, he walks out of the public area. I have no idea what it is that he needs to talk about, but that isn’t terribly important. How will my personal portrait appear when it is enshrined in the clubroom is now totally up to my ability of spacial orientation.

My self-portrait ends with a burst of laughter. Oh well, it’s better than making an absolutely plain face and chilling the room to below freezing anyway. Although Tsuruya-san, aren’t you laughing a bit too hard over this?

As I take off the towel and hearing Tsuruya-san’s high-pitch squeals, I see that Koizumi is back. I look at the clock out of reflex.

The time is slightly past two thirty.

“Pardon me.”

Without knowing what he’s planning, Koizumi somehow returns with Shamisen who disappeared into nowhere only just a while ago. Just what’s Koizumi doing with him?

“Nothing. He wouldn’t let go of Mori-san in the kitchen.”

Koizumi puts Shamisen directly on the cushion at the heater and he curls up into a ball having being bathed in the warm wind. Putting the cat somewhere warm while it has a full stomach is a sure-fire way to tame it.

“How are the results?”

Koizumi sits right next to me and looks toward the hearth. Tsuruya-san and Koizumi as well as my portraits have already been vandalized by my little sister and are now glued and ready for display. Instead of posting these, I suggest posting something else such as full-size shots of Asahina-san’s cosplay photos.

Time flies by and up next are Asahina-san and Nagato. Asahina-san looks cute doing just about anything as she struggles to find the facial parts with her shaking hands and by the end has made a funny, but very cute portrait, while surprisingly Nagato also completes an ultra-modernist picture. Of course, judging from Nagato’s expression, she has no idea why it is that her own self-portrait tickles at people’s funny bone as she stares at her own seemingly ‘happy’ work.

Just as we are dueling to the bitter end with the Fukuwarai pictures…

“Everyone, it is almost three o’clock,”

Koizumi suddenly announces.

“I would like to give everyone a recess for now. Please stay here from three till four o’clock. If anyone needs to go to the washroom then please do so right now.”

Save Nagato, Yutaka-san, Koizumi and me, everyone else has left the raised floor. Nagato studies her own portrait while Yutaka-san stares at Nagato’s profile with interest.

I ask Koizumi:

“When will the murder occur?”

“Let’s not talk about that for now. Take a look outside the window ok?” He points to the window. ”You can see that it is snowing outside right? Please remember that. Even if it weren’t snowing, I would have liked you to treat it as such, but things are actually falling into exact place so there’s no need for that.

Just as I start to examine the reassuring smile of Koizumi, the gang of four girls have returned. Yutaka-san seems to be the most likely suspect. There is no one else that fits the profile better, although I have yet to discover anything odd in his behavior.

Haruhi steps right into the hearth.

“Koizumi-kun, let’s play that next. Would you get it for me?”

“Sure, is this it?”

Koizumi heads toward the bag and I follow him to see just what kind of hand-made game gadgets he is about to dig out. Just as I look from behind him as he digs around in the bag, he quickly turns back and looks at me and as if he is doing magic, takes out a large sheet of paper from the bag.

“Please give this to Suzumiya-san for me, thank you.”

That folded piece of paper fluttered with the hot winds from the electric heater. After expanding it, I suddenly get this odd feeling. It isn’t over this enormous piece of paper though. Before me is Koizumi who is putting the bag down and beside me is the heater. Shamisen is sleeping soundly on the cushion to my back.

This scene is not really bizarre, but I keep feeling that something is up with this. The oddest part would be that Koizumi seems to be anxious when I stick with him.

“Kyon, get over here! Stop standing like an idiot!”

I head back to the hearth rather unwillingly and Koizumi joins us soon after.

The hour hand is now exactly pointed at three o’clock.

“I made this with Koizumi-kun.”

Haruhi is so swollen with pride that she’s almost up in the air and is this close from having pride written all over her face.

“This the Sugoroku custom made for the SOS Brigade. I made it square by square personally, so be grateful as you play on it.”

By the way, the first square that I park on after the first dice toss has the following words written on it:

“Only to Kyon, thirty sit-ups.”

There are also ‘Play *strip* rock, paper, scissor with the next person that comes to a stop’, ‘say five different things to make the chief happy’, ‘honestly answer everyone’s question (things that put people on the spot)’ and so forth. This Haruhi-made version of the game has rules that spell out punishment game.

With the rules set out as such, the players have to oblige. Asahina-san and Yutaka-san stop at the rock, paper, scissor square, but Asahina-san has no idea what the name of the game is and totally freezes up, so I take over instead. As for the other events, they are almost like a parade made to torture me. An hour after the game had started with Tsuruya-san reaching the end point, I am about to drop dead.

I am sure that Koizumi is not intervening out of pity, but seeing him raising his hand to comment is an enormous relief to me.

“Everyone, it is now exactly four o’clock.”

Koizumi announces like a live show announcer.

“Free activity time now begins. Please return by four thirty. By the way, please refrain from going out. Of course, that applies to anyone who is not the murderer.”

“Well then, excuse me.”

Tamaru Yutaka-san gives a smile laced with hidden meanings as he leaves his seat.

“I am going to open up my luggage in my room. Hmm~ I should return in five minutes.”

Yutaka-san leaves the floor after having said that. “We’re off to the kitchen.” Haruhi and Tsuruya-san also take off. Within a few minutes they return with desserts and juice. None of us has left the hearth save for them, since no one wants to be wrongfully accused as the perpetrator of the crime, since that’s the worst thing to have happen to you.

Note that Yutaka-san has indeed returned in about five minutes.

The time is just past four thirty.

Mori-san has come to the public area and informs us that:

“Keiichi-sama is not answering my calls.”

She acts out an unsettled look.

“I’ve tried to wake him in the small hut, but there’s no answer and the door is locked from within.”

“The moment has finally arrived.”

Haruhi stands up full of spirit.

“Let us go see the situation at the scene.”

Haruhi marches over to the walkway like the guide of a tour group, with us trailing behind.

When we arrive at the courtyard and open the door, we find enough outdoor shoes for all of us. Arakawa is already at the door of the hut when we step onto the corridor leading to the hut.

“What’s the situation?”

“I see that Mori has informed you all. It is as she has said, the door is locked from inside. The key and Keiichi-san are both in the room. By the way, there is no spare key. That sums up the situation.”

“That’s it.” Koizumi starts to explain: “There is no need to break down the door. Everyone just has to think along the lines of there being no spare key. Arakawa-san, key please.”

Arakawa the butler extends his palm and a key is in his hand.

“Pay no heed to this key that shouldn’t have existed.”

Haruhi steps right in the moment that Koizumi has opened the door.

“Hi.”

Keiichi-san waved at us with one hand. The elder Tamaru who is lying on the bedsheets points to his chest and says:

“I have been stabbed again.”

On his chest was the handle of a dagger. It’s one of those common little toys that you can buy just about anywhere to scare people with.

“Who stabbed you?” Haruhi asks.

“That I can’t tell you. I am a corpse by now. Dead men don’t talk.”

With that, Keiichi spreads his arms and lies flat on the tatami.

“Everyone please listen to me.” Koizumi starts again: “Please observe the surrounding. The key to the hut is on the desk. It would be the one that Keiichi-san was given when he arrived. To put it another way, the killer did not leave through the door.”

Koizumi proceeds to the window by the engawa.

“This window is closed, but not locked. That is to say, the killer escaped through this window. In addition, notice the thick layer of snow outside.”

Koizumi opens the window and we all take a look at the courtyard.

“Let me explain the perpetrator’s escape path. The killer no doubt must have escaped through here if not through the door. To walk on snow must mean that there’s footprints, but there is no such mark on the snow. Please look above the window. This hut has an overhanging roof on all four corners. A thin layer of snow has accumulated beneath them. It looks to be that the killer must have gone along the field beneath the roof or along the outer wall of the hut and back to the corridor.”

I stare at the ground that Koizumi points to and then at the sky. Snowflakes are drifting down gradually.

“The footprints of the killer have been covered by the snowfall. From the rate of accumulation… yes, let me make the point that the footprints won’t disappear with less than thirty minutes of snowfall.”

Koizumi seems to seek everybody’s consensus on the matter.

“This is my scenario setting, so please forgive me. Dead men won’t talk and I, as the game planner, sure won’t lie about anything either.”

“Oh~”

Haruhi looks at the snow and then at Koizumi, her face sinks as she hugs her chest.

“That’s it?”

Koizumi gives no response and only merely points to the sheets. Within the soft quilt, something seems to moving about. Could it be…

Haruhi is the one that moves the quilt out of the way, and she says the following on the object:

“Shamisen?”

The thing that narrows its eyes from the sudden exposure to light is none other than my cat.

We take our place over the hearth once more.

Mori-san and Arakawa-san are standing perfectly still behind us. Only Keiichi-san the victim has done his duty and by now should be leisurely enjoying hot coffee over at some restaurant.

“Let me summarize the key points. Keiichi-san went into the hut for a nap at about two o’clock. The body was discovered only recently, at around four thirty. The perpetrator must have committed the crime within the last two and a half hours. The entrance of the hut is locked from inside and the key is in the room. Let me remind you that there is no spare key. The window to the side is unlocked, which means that the killer must have escaped through the window.”

The above is Koizumi’s explanation.

“It is impossible to head to the corridor through the window without a trace. Having no footprint indicates that the original footprints have been covered by snow.”

Koizumi looks at the calico that my sister is hugging.

“Lastly, Shamisen is present on the scene of the crime along with the victim. Please think back to when you have last seen the cat, before we have discovered the body and the cat.”

The last time that I saw him would be when Koizumi had announced that we could head to the washroom. He was sound asleep, curled up in a ball, when Koizumi took out Haruhi’s self-made sugoroku punishment game.

“Eh? Really?”

Haruhi pokes at her forehead with a finger.

“I didn’t notice Shamisen for the last three hours. Was he really there?”

“I did see…” Asahina-san shows reservation with her words. “Yes, I’d seen it when we were playing the Fukuwarai. It was lying on the cushion and sleeping.”

“He was asleep when I last saw him too!” Tsuruya-san says. “Just as I was heading to the washroom, I saw the kitty laying there, curled up in a ball, but I don’t remember if I saw him when we started with Fukuwarai.”

Based on everyone’s testimonies, I seem to be the last person to have seen Shamisen. Basically, Shamisen has no alibi from three till four thirty.

Could it have been that Shamisen woke up in the middle of our game and went for a leisurely walk? And after walking round and round he headed to Keiichi-san’s hut and dug into the bed in order to catch some sleep…

Hmm? No way.

“I do not think that the cat would leave on his own to go to the hut.” I propose. “He was freezing to death just by being outside for a little bit and he was freaked out by the snow. That and there’s no way that he could open the door to the courtyard by himself.”

“That is true.”

Koizumi nods.

“Therefore someone must have taken him there. It would either have been Keiichi-san or the killer.”

“It couldn’t have been Keiichi-san.”

Haruhi extends her neck.

“He mentioned before that he is allergic to cats, although it might have been too dead obvious, but it does answer that question, almost as if it were said intentionally.”

“Of course, for that is the setting to the drama. If such a setting is not present things will get problematic. That is to say, the one that had taken the cat into the hut must have been the culprit, which is a hint in itself.”

Haruhi raises her hand regarding Koizumi’s speech.

“Wait a second. How about this? Shamisen was here at three, and he’s gone right after that. The killer must have left the house before four-thirty, at the latest. Given that you need thirty minutes to cover up the tracks, the time of the crime has to be pushed back to around four. That would mean that the killer must have taken Shamisen somewhere between three to four, which would also be the time that Keiichi-san was killed.”

“True, definitely quite logical.”

“As if that was logical. This doesn’t add up. Only Tsuruya-san and I left here at four, but I was with her at all times, so I couldn’t have been the culprit. Although Yutaka-san is suspicious, he couldn’t have done it with that thirty minutes of time required to cover the tracks.”

“That’s true.”

“True my ass! That would mean that everyone’s got an alibi since we’ve all been staying put over here for that one hour.”

There are eight of us that were playing the Fukuwarai at three, being myself, Haruhi, Asahina-san, Nagato, Koizumi, my sister, Tsuruya-san, and Yutaka-san. Since the break before three until the start of free time at four, none of us had left. The only thing that had mysteriously vanished would be the cat.

“Could the killer have been Arakawa-san or Mori-san?”

We decide to call the two attendants over for interrogation. Haruhi asks as if she is a prosecutor:

“Well then, Arakawa-san, what were you doing at three o’clock?”

Butler Arakawa returns with a polite bow.

“I have been at the kitchen since two o’clock, cleaning up the dishes from lunch and preparing for tonight’s dinner as well as making snacks and preparing the ingredients for tomorrow’s breakfast.”

“Were there any witnesses?”

“If I may.” Mori-san in maid attire shows a smile on her beautiful face. “I was alongside Arakawa as we prepared the meals. He did not leave my sight until four-thirty when I went to wake Keiichi-sama.”

“Likewise.” Arakawa-san says. “At least from three to four-thirty, I am positive that Mori did not leave the kitchen at all, if you would accept my testimony.”

“That is to say that you two are providing alibis for each other.”

Haruhi nods her head.

“But that leaves the possibility that you two share the crime. It is entirely possible that one of you is covering for the other.”

Haruhi’s glimmering eyes turn to Koizumi as if she is demanding another explanation.

“That would be impossible. The premise of this murder case is that it has a sole assailant and that both Arakawa-san and Mori-san will not make any false statements. By the way, the two of them did not commit the crime. The guarantee is that my word, as the scenario designer, is right.” Says Koizumi.

“If so, who can the killer be?” Haruhi seems happy. “Everyone has a flawless alibi, so wouldn’t that mean that nobody killed Keiichi-san?”

Koizumi seems to be a little bit pleased. Haruhi has really scratched where he itches. He shows a smile:

“That is why I would like to ask everyone to think about it and solve the mystery, or this would not be a detective mystery game.”

“The first step is to think of the reason behind the culprit using Shamisen.”

Haruhi, who has risen to chair the deduction meeting pokes at the nose of the lazy calico that my sister is embracing.

“Otherwise there’s no meaning then. Just what could the killer have been up to that makes him ask for help from a cat?”

If the cat could speak once more, he’d have the best testimony, for he is a witness.

“Definitely. I feel as if that there must be a reason for Shamisen to be present on the scene of the crime.”

I know that much without having you spelling it out. The real headache is the rationale behind all of this.

“Kitty, kitty, umm~” Asahina talks to herself in such a cute way, as she puts a hand over the head of the cat. “Kitty, calico, mew. Umm~ umm, little kitty, eat cat food.”

There’s not much sense to that.

Tsuruya-san, who seems to have a very keen sense of observation, sticks out her tongue and her eyes slants upward just like the mascot of a brand of candy. (note: That would be Peko-chan of Fujiya) Maybe that’s just how she looks when she is in thinking mode. She shows this most interesting look and hugs her chest in silence.

Nagato is almost synonymous to silence. Although I’d say that she should keep quiet given the current state of affairs, I dare say that Nagato has already seen through Koizumi’s stupid plot. Let’s hope that she will jump in when everyone else gives up on the deduction game.

“The real key here is Shamisen’s disappearance. If we assume that he wasn’t there in the beginning… that’d be a sealed room mystery? A temporarily sealed room made possible by the snowfall… hmm?”

Haruhi who was thinking aloud suddenly lifts her head and stares at Koizumi’s smile and then gives a glance over towards Yutaka-san’s collected expression, then at Shamisen’s sleepy face.

“Temporary sealed room… alibi… ahh, I get it.”

Haruhi sudden turns my way.

“Kyon, what do you think of when we’re talking about alibis?”

“Police drama.” I start to regret it the moment I utter that out. “Ur… two hour detective mystery theater.” The comment that comes right after only makes me all the more embarrassed. As I think of what to say next, the clock ticks by a second at a time.

“It’s a conspiracy!”

Haruhi answers her own question.

“What else could it have been other than a conspiracy to provide an alibi? Shamisen is a setup to give the culprit an alibi.”

What kind of setup?

“Use your head for once! Listen, at what time did Shamisen’s alibi start?”

From three o’clock till about four-thirty. The last time that I saw him would be around three, and he’s transported to the scene of the crime by four thirty.

“Stop thinking about that period of time. Think back at events earlier than that.”

Before three? Wouldn’t that be when we were roaming about in the villa? Wait, hold on.

“Koizumi, when was it that you had the cat brought back here?”

The easy smile on that handsome face seems to change to a more accented angle.

“At just past two-thirty.”

“Where did you get him from?”

“The kitchen.”

Koizumi gives a smile to Mori-san.

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

Mori looks at Shamisen with a smile.

“When I was tending to clean-up work in the kitchen, this cat would not let go of the side of my leg. I couldn’t resist his begging, so I fed him with the leftovers, but he only got more underfoot… Koizumi-san came by just in time, and I asked him to bring the cat back here.”

I remember now, Koizumi had said that he needed to talk about tomorrow’s plans and left his seat for a while.

“That was at two-thirty?”

Mori-san, the maid in plain attire, displays a brilliant smile that would have people take a few steps backward from its glimmer.

“Err… I believe so. I did not look at the time so I cannot be sure of the exact moments, although it should have been around two-thirty or so.”

“Starting when had Shamisen been staying there?”

“About two. It was grooming its fur when I returned from the cabin.”

That’s basically his whereabouts. After my calico escaped the clutches of my little sister, he went off to beg for food from Mori-san, and then got taken back here at around two-thirty by Koizumi. That’s no doubt why he was napping so soundly the moment he hit the futon by the heater.

He simply sneaked back there, so that’s it. The calico roaming around the estate after having escaped the clutches of my sister, went begging for food from Mori-san and then he was brought back by Koizumi at two-thirty, which would explain why he had been napping the moment he got to the futon close to the heater.

“With this, there exists an explanation for his whereabouts from two to three.”

An alibi for an hour? What did Shamisen see going from here to the hut?

“There is a scam here.”

Haruhi squeezes her eyes and touches her throat. It is as if the clues will leap out just by her doing this move.

“The only thing that we are sure of is the movements during that one hour, while everything else is sketchy, especially as to the whereabouts of the cat after three. The explanation for the cat’s absence, and how Shamisen fell to the culprit’s lap…”

Haruhi shows an expression of contemplation, and I acted along with her. My sister looks on at us with a bewildered expression, Yutaka-san looks on with only a smile. He probably knows the truth already, given that he is the lead suspect.

“Need more hints?”

“A moment.”

I halt Koizumi’s comments as I start to organize my thoughts.

It was at around two that Keiichi-san headed off to the hut.

The cat was last seen at three, and nobody had seen him from then till four-thirty when we found him in Keiichi-san’s room.

If the killer sneaked off to the main building through the window, it had to be done early enough so that the falling snow can cover his tracks. The time of murder can be deduced to be around three to four.

However, from three to four, all of us, including Yutaka-san were on the open floor and did not go out. It is only after four that Yutaka-san, Haruhi and Tsuruya-san had left.

Hmm, all right. I nodded sympathetically.

“Give us some clues.”

Koizumi lifts his shoulders.

“I thought that the first to have noticed would’ve been either you or your sister.”

With that, he falls to silence.

“What did you say?”

What kind of a hint is that? For goodness sake, my sister and I aren’t nearly as sharp as Haruhi and Tsuruya-san.

“Ahh, I got it!”

A brightly lit Tsuruya-san raises her voice after Haruhi,

“I know it now! Haruhi-nyan! The proof that the cat isn’t there is the alibi for the culprit being absent.”

Tsuruya-san continues with a look of sudden realization on her face:

“Yeah, that’s it! That’s why the kitty cannot be elsewhere. Not just anywhere, and not in the hut, but rather it has to be in the public space that everyone is at.”

I did not understand one word that came out of Tsuruya-san’s mouth. While Asahina-san and I are dumbstruck, Haruhi seems to follow, and shouts out at a high decibel level,

“That’s it! That’s right, that’s it! Tsuruya-san, nice! Basically, within that one hour, the cat must be at a place that it can be seen by all, for if the culprit didn’t do that, his own alibi for not being there would be blown.”

“Bingo!”

Tsuruya-san makes a loud snap with her fingers.

“Shami went missing not at three, but at two-thirty… no… rather within the thirty minutes between two-thirty to three… in other words, the time of murder should be at around two-thirty, am I right?”

“Yep!’

Hold on for a minute all right? Would it be too much trouble to explain to those of us that are lost what you two have come to realize? I can’t make head nor tail out of the current situation.

“You’re slow. Kyon, for Shamisen to go missing from three to four-thirty, and then to emerge at the scene of the crime afterwards would puzzle who?”

That would be us.

“Well, who stands to gain from that?”

Nobody.

“As if it’s nobody! The killer was the one that whisked Shamisen away and locked him into the hut! There has to be a reason as to why the murderer would do that. Let me ask you again, which part would be the most beneficial to the murderer?”

Haruhi’s eyes glare at me menacingly, as would the eyes of the culprit at the detective.

“Ahh-” I say. “Shamisen would be at the hut… because of the culprit taking him there, so the moment that Shamisen vanished would be the time of the murder…”

“That’s it?”

Ahh? What’s it?

“You still don’t get it! Everybody thinking this way is how the plot was to start. The killer wants us to think that the interval of time where Shamisen has no alibi for absence is the moment that the crime occurred!”

“Everyone has an alibi from three to four.” Tsuruya-san picks up with the explanation. “However what about after two? Does the fact that we were told not to leave the scene mean that nobody had left?”

“That is because the murderer must ensure that he has an alibi from two to three.” Haruhi continues. “So, he has to make it seem as if Shamisen never left here. Why is that? It’s because Shamisen, having gone missing from three to four-thirty, would actually establish the murderer’s alibi. That is because Shamisen cannot possibly be over here and at the scene of the crime simultaneously; so knowing when the cat was here leads one to think that the murderer couldn’t

have taken him to the hut at the same time. But the last person to have seen Shamisen was you, and that was at three. The culprit wants us to conclude that he would have taken him to the hut at around three, so we fall into his psychological trap."

"With that, who the murderer might be is obvious. It would be the person that has no clear alibi at about two-thirty and who was close to the kitty before three!"

Tsuruya-san chuckles.

"Kyon, are you following this? Think outside of the box. We only have to find the person that can take advantage of the time when Keiichi-san entered the hut, at two, to four-thirty, when we broke into the room. If you think about it, there can only be one person that could've done it. However, if you assume that the murder took place after three, he would have proof of absence from the scene. In summary, we made a wrong assumption on the moment of murder!"

Haruhi, not to be trumped, shows a bright smile.

"That's right. Keiichi-san was killed before three. Shamisen was taken to the hut at that time as well."

"Hold on," I start asking, "how can you account for the Shamisen that I saw at three then? How about the Shamisen who was napping that Asahina-san saw before three? Could Shamisen split himself?"

"Kyon, you still don't get it?"

Haruhi shows a victory smile in stride.

"I will now explain the actions of the murderer to you. First, since the creator of the game assured us that Mori-san and Arikawa-san are not the culprits and would not give false alibis, their testimonies are not important."

It seems that the only ones that don't get it would be me, Asahina-san and my sister.

"The murderer left this public space some time between two and three, took Shamisen from the kitchen and whisked him off to the room in the hut where Keiichi-san was at. It is not important whether or not the room was locked. At any rate, the murderer went into the room, assassinated Keiichi-san, and locked the door from the inside, leaving Shamisen off to the side, and snuck back into the house from the corridor empty-handed."

"Wait," I further inquire, "what about the Shamisen that I saw? Where did the Shamisen that was sleeping by the futon over the heater come from?"

"In short, that cat would not be Shamisen."

Haruhi glanced at Tsuruya-san. Having assured herself that Tsuruya-san's expression is in total agreement-

"To conclude, based on the scenario, there can be only one murderer, and that culprit could've only done it by himself within the window of a few minutes at around two-thirty, while everyone else would not have had the chance to have gone back and forth between the main building and the cabin. Regardless of any alibi, that person would be the culprit. I have already disproved his alibi. Assuming Shamisen really did go missing at around two-thirty, then there is no other explanation than that the Shamisen you saw was a fake."

Tsuruya-san stretches her neck.

"Let's put it this way, Kyon-kun, lemme ask you. Was the Shami that you saw from two-thirty till three, the real Shami?"

I am flabbergasted with her asking me that. It's true, I only saw the back of the cat, both as it was brought in or as it slept over the futon. I did not see it from up close.

But then, a fake? Where'd the copycat come from? Could it be that clones of Shamisen have been secretly engineered somewhere?

"How would I know that?" Haruhi answers in a delighted manner. "I tell you, all that is irrelevant speculation. The calico that was dozing off from two-thirty to three on the futon was not Shamisen, and could not have been Shamisen. Be it a clone, a doll, or a similar cat… it would not be your calico."

"Haruhi-nyan, everyone should know by now who the killer is, so let's just announce his name already. We can't move on if we don't do that."

Tsuruya-san happily offered this opinion. Haruhi lightly nods in agreement.

"Yeah, especially for Kyon, for if we hold it back any longer, he will probably be pondering about this throughout the entirety of the winter break. Ready- do it together?"

"Sure. The culprit of this murder case is-"

The two smile at a certain individual and as partners performing in unison, they name the murderer in one synchronized breath…

"Koizumi!"

Koizumi lifts his hands like a wanted suspect being arrested by famous fortune hunters with dual Winchesters.

"That's right."

He continues with a slightly bitter smile, as if defeated:

“I am the murderer. I would have liked to have everyone think about this for a little longer, but I still fell victim to the combined minds of Suzumiya-san and Tsuruya-san.”

Haruhi’s mouth is sticking out with her laughter,

“Why didn’t you give us free time at around three instead of four? That way, figuring out who the murderer is would have taken more time.”

“That’s right, that would have made it more difficult to determine who the culprit might be,” Koizumi starts to explain. “Should one of you have left, that is, to have taken more than five minutes away around three’o clock - the five minutes being the time from the hut to the house - it would be difficult to remove the person from the list of suspects. In other words, it would make it rather easy for the murderer to be misidentified. Instead of risking that happening, I made it so that nobody could possibly be a suspect; otherwise the game would become too difficult to play.”

Could it be that the thought simply didn’t occur to you, seeing as you are talking up a storm over this?

“Where did you hide the double for Shamisen?”

“In my room. I had Arakawa-san ship it into the room beforehand, so as to not have him be an accessory to the murder. From the view of the scenario, I was the one that brought the double in.”

Koizumi’s facial expression looks like a slave student part-timer that is getting off work.

“I took the cat out of my room after having done the murder. Everything that followed would be obvious to you all.”

So Koizumi brought a double in at two-twenty. But-

“Where is the cat?” I ask once more. “Where’d the fake go? Where would that fake Shamisen whom I’ve never seen up close have gone off to? It would be more than a coincidence if it had disappeared as well.”

Koizumi gave a quick glance at Haruhi, as if defeated, and then our very own chief steps up and strides to an end of the floor where the heater is located.

“Kyon, just think back to the scene carefully. Wasn’t Koizumi-kun right beside the cat as it slept on the futon when you saw them? Koizumi took out the Sugoroku from the backpack and handed them to you right? With that, you took the Sugoroku game to the hearth, which had all of our attention. Koizumi used this break to stuff the napping cat into the backpack. Therefore…”

Haruhi grabs the backpack standing by the wall while the heater blows warm air through the area.

“It should be in here.”

Saying this, she tips the open bag upside-down and a ball-like shape falls from within.

“Shamisen?”

This cat really resembles Shamisen a great deal, to the point that I can’t help myself but to blurt that out. Whether it’s the physique or the expressions, this is a one-to-one copy. The largest difference is that this cat’s a female. Male calicos are rare finds in the world, you could go ask your biology teacher as to why that is so.

The fake Shamisen at first sat still on the floor. Then, raising her tail, she heads over to sniff noses with Shamisen who my sister is still holding onto. My cat stares at the female with his round eyes, and then he frees himself from my sister’s hands. The cats’ noses take aim at each others’ rear ends. Following that the two start to chase each others’ tails, going round and round. After about ten seconds though, the female gets hit on the nose.

“Oy! Shami!”

Shamisen, who was now groaning and complaining from his throat, gets picked up by my sister; after staring around for the longest time, the female jumps onto Nagato’s lap for no apparent reason and sits there.

“…”

Nagato lowers her expressionless gaze, coming face-to-face with the kitten that is looking straight back at her. Eventually she carefully extends her hand.

The copycat seems to be very satisfied with Nagato’s stroking, as she closes her eyes and curls up in a ball. The two cats are very similar, although with a hint of difference. I for one have spent two months living with Shamisen, making it rather easy for me to tell my own cat apart from this other cat’s face-

“So that’s why you said that you assumed that I or my sister should be the first to notice that something seems off?”

“Exactly. I was breaking out in a sweat when you came to me. Had you already discovered the truth, I would’ve told you the whole story secretly and dragged you along with me. However, after examining your expression, it seemed that you did not notice anything at all.”

So sorry. That would be to Shamisen.

“The hardest part was to find that cat.”

Below is the supplemental explanation from Koizumi, the lead.

“I only found out that an identical cat to Shamisen does not exist after physically going out and searching for one. I thought that all calicos are the same at first, but it turns out that I am too naïve. I only found a similar stray after having gone across the country, but the match is not one-hundred percent. The only way to go was to dye parts of the fur on the cat. However, the preparation work didn’t end with that, as training was required for the cat.”

What trick did it need to learn?

“The most common trick taught to dogs- ‘wait.’ All would be for naught if it started to walk all over the place, therefore I needed to teach her to pose herself asleep until I give her instructions. If she moved during the thirty minutes on the futon or during the hour in the backpack, it would lead to major trouble.”

Koizumi shakes his head as if he is reflecting on on the affair. This cat might have the potential to be a show cat given how it was able to learn such a trick. It might actually be easier to teach Koizumi on how to hypnotize cats instead.

“I have named the cat as Shamisen the Second, Shami-ni in short, as I couldn’t think of a better name.”

With that puzzling excuse out of the way, Koizumi cleared his throat:

“The detective game has come to an end. Suzumiya-san and Tsuruya-san have both made the correct deduction, so both deserve the prize. I will present the prize shortly.”

Koizumi gives a bow gracefully.

“This concludes the event. I thank everyone for their support, especially Tsuruya-san for lending the guest house, Tamaru Keiichi-san for posing as the dead and Yutaka-san as the misleading character, and of course for the great help from Arakawa-san and Mori-san. I give you all my deepest gratitude. Thank you for your supporting roles from the opening till the end.”

Haruhi and Tsuruya-san start to clap like monkeys, and my sister follows, while the seemingly totally stymied Asahina-san goes along as well. Seeing Nagato, with a cat on her lap also clapping along without making a noise, I clap my hands as well.

Way to go, Koizumi.

The prize is a tiny, electroplated trophy. On the trophy, a cat is engraved doing a headstand, made in manga style. From the looks of it, it looks somewhat like Shamisen. Since Haruhi and Tsuruya-san have already taken a ‘V’ pose, shoulder to shoulder with the trophy up high, I can

get on with taking their pictures to commemorate the event. Shamisen the First and Second are of course included in the scene.

A while afterwards, Mori-san and Arakawa-san send out the Toshikoshi-soba earlier than expected. Haruhi and Tsuruya-san immediately start to gorge on the meal, while Koizumi over to the side doesn't even lift his chopsticks. Oh yes, I have never seen him chowing down on food.

"How did you like the skit?"

This is a rarity, for even in the fantasia yesterday, Koizumi had not asked my opinion with such an unsure smile. Although I did not want to praise his self-production and acting-

"That should be fine right?"

I drank the noodle sauce, with broth and Nagi added to the mix.

"Haruhi's mood is as good as it ever gets. You should be happy with that."

"Having heard you say that is an honor. My hard work has finally paid off, for ultimately this detective drama was made to appease Suzumiya-san."

You appeased her alright, but you had me lost totally. Asahina-san, who was just as confused, is still trying to make sense of it with her notebook open.

"That one is the one at two, and this is the one at three. The cat arrived at between two to three… or was it two thirty? Umm… mew mew."

I chew away at my soba with a deeply concerned look. The person most confused would be my sister, but she is lying down on the floor and eating away as if she doesn't even care about the mystery.

I take a breath of relief seeing Nagato's appetite back to normal, with that female calico on her lap. When it comes down to it, having everyone acting as usual is the bottom line, although the strangely out of line Koizumi is still trying to get sympathy from me:

"My mind has been totally occupied by this event ever since the winter co-ed was announced. Thanks to everyone, I am finally free. I hate being the culprit, and I am not really killer material. I am also happy to resign the role of the detective. I am best as a commentator."

I think that the role of the commentator should be abolished. It's fine so long as nothing happens that would require you to blabber away endlessly-

-an idea just flashed before my mind!

"This murder drama didn't need to be acted out, right? It simply follows your script. If that's how it is, then wouldn't it be fine to just give people printed scenario scripts and leave it at that?"

Koizumi's face seems to be stuck as if noodles were stuck in his throat, and following that he murmurs out a sound like a heavyweight challenger who had been struck in the head, with nonstop bleeding and the doctor telling him to throw in the towel.

"…I suppose that's true." He doesn't seem to want to admit it.

"Oh yes, Koizumi-kun,"

Haruhi speaks while asking for a refill from Mori-san,

"I leave next summer up to you as well. We've already been to a lone island and a snow mountain, so the stage next time should be something even more suspenseful, such as a place with some odd name. Anywhere is fine, even overseas. Hey, how about a castle? An old fortification made of stone is the perfect setting."

Haruhi has effectively scrapped Koizumi and my desire, as she swings her chopsticks around like a conductor's baton.

"I know a great place! My dad has a friend who happens to own a castle overseas!"

Tsuruya-san has 'delivered' without fail and goes along with Haruhi. This is just great; now Haruhi is in an even more elated mood than before.

"Hear that? Everyone had better get their passport done before summer vacation, alright!"

I look on to Koizumi, and simultaneously sigh in defeat. We cannot withstand the battering of the joined forces of Haruhi and Tsuruya-san as a duo. I, after all, am only a minor character whose task it is to persuade Haruhi to give up on her plan to conquer the world. Koizumi is only the SOS Brigade's expert drama producer. It might be easier to deal with opponents out of nowhere than the Titanic Sisters.

It looks like if I don't think of something, the SOS Brigade will spawn an overseas division sooner or later. I hope that the situation then won't become totally uncontrollable - I say this to myself, in the depths of my ears, with my deficient language skills.

This would be the first time ever that I am to spend New Year's Eve without television.

Mori-san and the others are all taking part in the second round of Sugoroku. This is easy on Haruhi but hard on me, and without any notice, we're already into nighttime. The lavish feast and time for chatting have gone by, and midnight is quickly approaching while we squander the time away; when we finally notice the hour, the year's about to end.

"When we wake up tomorrow morning, we can start the Fude Hajime and the Hanetsuki tournament."

Would you let us have some Zouni before anything else?

“Of course, that’s a must for New Year’s. After all, we couldn’t be satisfied with just playing Fukuwarai.”

Haruhi stares at the clock on the wall.

“It’s bad if we don’t visit the temple.”

It’s not that bad. No matter how easygoing the buddhas are, they no doubt won’t want to see you paying tribute to them. The shrine that we used for backdrop during the filming of that movie probably has posted warning signs out to forbid us from visiting them.

“What’re you talking about? To be so blessed as to be in a country where all sorts of religions are practiced, it would be a shame not to do everything. Besides, why not celebrate New Year’s as we’ve already done Christmas? The idea of not celebrating New Year’s is like having already reserved for a banquet and leaving after only looking at the utensils! That’s why we definitely have to be there for the temple visit!”

Well then, why not dig a snow cave out in the courtyard, and put in a donation bin and a little shrine? Well inside the cave, a Miko-wardrobe clad Asahina-san would be the resident deity. That way we wouldn’t have to run to some temple, and I would devoutly worship through day and night, and after that, followers will no doubt flock in, and with that kind of influx of people, the donation bin will definitely not be empty.

“Idiot!”

Haruhi holds onto the sweet shoulder of Asahina-san.

“Although it is hard to just not have Mikuru-chan dressed as a Miko, I want to see her in a long sleeve kimono first! Although that would be fine to do when the co-ed is over and we’re back at home. Let’s go to some nearby temple or shrine! Ahh, of course Yuki has to get dressed up too! Myself as well.”

Asahina-san’s ear lobe is now reddish from Haruhi biting on it. Haruhi nods after having a look at the clock.

“Everyone, it’s time.”

On Haruhi’s direction, we sit in a circle. The five SOS Brigade members not withstanding, Tsuruya-san has also become a part of the circle, and my sister along with the two cats are sitting beside her. The temporary quartet of the Tamaru brothers, the maid and the butler also are invited in by Haruhi. Are you sure that’s alright? If things don’t go well, you’ll all be bossed around as honorary members.

However, nobody is taking heed of my concern, as everyone shows unique smiles. Obviously, a person who is still frowning about at this point would be facing rough times ahead, so I drop my complaints.

On Haruhi's order, we all bow, and say that all-too-common phrase together.

That is a phrase which we say year after year because we're all out of ideas, and it'd be weird to use something else as a substitute. A sentence that is in five-five-five format. (Akemashite Omedetou Gozaiimasu, or Happy New Year)

The Melancholy of Asahina Mikuru

Even though many incidents happened during winter break, it more or less turned out to be as I expected, just like getting nothing in return after purchasing a lottery ticket. As I reluctantly trudged through the cold, I silently blamed the school's lame construction as it made the already freezing temperature seem even colder.

Trying not to suspect the cold of being a top-secret counter-measure made to combat global warming, I tried to fix my eyes elsewhere, but they so happened to land on the classroom's malfunctioning heater, making me wonder if our classroom was actually colder than the north pole itself. Thinking about how I would have to suffer the same fate until I graduated from high school, I was embarrassed at myself for not choosing a better school. But alas, what could I do? I was already stuck at North High.

After school, having nothing better to do, I once again made my way to the clubroom.

Originally belonging to the literature club, the club room had, during the past year, slowly morphed into the SOS Brigade's official headquarters (although I'm not sure "official" is the right word to use). Just like a mother bird gradually forgetting about its own young and treating a cuckoo's baby as its own, the whole school seemed to have forgotten about the literature club's existence. Added to the fact that the sole literature club member didn't mind us occupying her club room, even I wasn't bothered by it much anymore, never mind Haruhi.

No matter how you looked at it, this was the only place I could go after school hours. Although I did intend to skip club activities once in a while, the thought of a certain girl sitting behind me trying to drill holes in my back with her killer intent fired through high intensity vision beams was enough to vanquish any attempt of any kind. It simply wasn't worth the risk. However, I wasn't sure if I was making the right choice, or merely the easy one.

With those thoughts in mind, I instinctively knocked on the door, having arrived at the club room without even knowing it. If I were to enter without first knocking, there was a good chance I would be greeted with a sight as beautiful as heaven to behold. However, I'd rather make that small, often insignificant gesture, in order to ensure something like that doesn't ever happen again.

Under normal circumstances, I would often be answered with a soft "Yes," as the door was slowly opened by my smiling sempai, whose appearance was angelic to say the least. She was so beautiful she could easily pass as a fairy, pixie or elf in disguise. Waiting for her to open the door was an after-school ritual that I had comfortably gotten used to.

"……"

There was no answer. Hence it was safe to conclude that there were no fairies, pixies, elves or smiling board game freaks in the club room. Even if there were someone inside, it would be the

silent book-lover. Not even Haruhi was inside. This I was willing to wager my most prized possession, second only to my life, on.

Having reached this conclusion, I boldly opened the door, as if opening the door to the refrigerator in my house.

Of course, Haruhi wasn't inside, nor Koizumi, and to my surprise, not even Nagato.

But———

Asahina-san was.

Her hot figure was impossible to conceal under that maid outfit, as she sat on one of those steel folding chairs, holding her broom in one hand, and wearing a look that suggested that she was spacing out. There was no doubt, it was our beloved Asahina-san all right.

Wait, something wasn't right.

She was totally oblivious of me entering the club room, as she sat there gazing into space, occasionally letting out a sigh or two. It was simply amazing. Even simple gestures like that could be watched over and over on tape, and still be equally beautiful.

I admired the beautiful scene before me for a full minute, before I proceeded to wake her up.

"Asahina-san?"

The desired effect was instantaneous.

"Eh? Ah? Ah! Yes!"

Jumping up from her seat, Asahina-san looked at me with eyes full of surprise, as she tightly clutched her broom in a half sitting position.

"Ahhhh, Kyon-kun…. When did you arrive?"

What do you mean when, I clearly remember I knocked.

"Eh, d-did you? I d-didn't hear it at all…… S-sorry."

Asahina-san's face turned a deep shade of pink, as she nervously answered my question. "Umm… I was thinking about some… ehh…. stuff…"

Asahina-san hurriedly stuffed the broom into a utility closet Haruhi nicked not too long ago, before raising her head to face me. The expression she wore was also fantastic! Anything she did was fantastic! Asahina-san banzai! If it weren't for me constantly reminding myself not to, I would have surely rushed forward and cuddled her in my arms, which is what I've always

wanted to do. Well, what are you waiting for then? Just do it! Nay, hold on a second, try to think about what would happen to both you and the world… Just as the war between the angels and demons in my mind was fast coming to a conclusion—-

“Where’s Suzumiya-san? Isn’t she with you?”

Those miserably short sentences were enough to bring me back to reality. Oh crap, I had almost caused another major disaster, one that involved the fate of the world. Again. Pretending as if nothing had happened, which was partially true after all, I calmly placed my bag on the desk.

“That girl’s in charge of class duty today. She’s probably sweeping the auditorium right now.”

“I see…”

As if uninterested in Haruhi’s current whereabouts, Asahina-san once again closed her cherry lips.

Even though I wasn’t really good at guessing Asahina-san’s thoughts, I could clearly tell something was different with today’s Asahina-san. The time-traveler would usually welcome me into the club room with a smile as bright as a flower in the sun (of course, most of the glow was due to my imagination), along with her clear, hazel eyes and soft, silky hair, while giving out an aura of absolute sweetness. Today, however, she radiated a sense of melancholy.

With the words “troubled” clearly written all over her face, Asahina-san stood there looking at me, her hands twirling furiously in her lap, as if she had to convey an extremely difficult message. Sadly, it wasn’t due to her being unable to confess her love towards me. I’ve only seen this Asahina-san once, and it didn’t take long for the memory to once again resurface. This was the same expression Asahina-san wore when she unexpectedly begged me to follow her (for the first time) to the past, or more specifically, to the 7th of July three years ago, the day of the Tanabata Festival.

Half a year had passed since then, and while Asahina-san has grown even cuter, I unfortunately remain that idiot who always succumbs to a woman’s charm. Although I knew that this had more-or-less something to do with Haruhi or the current state of the SOS Brigade, I consoled myself yet again by saying “Oh never mind, that isn’t so bad either”. No matter what Asahina-san said, I would never remain startled for too long, never mind refuse her offer.

As I was busy trying to imprint Asahina-san’s red maid outfit as my homework, it appeared that she finally made up her mind, as she opened her round lips and said:

“K-kyon-kun, I-I have a favor to ask…”

Creak.

The door to the club room softly opened, as if trying to make the least amount of noise as possible. With a swish~ it slowly slid open. I instinctively turned my head backwards, only to see the short-haired, poker-faced girl silently enter the room.

Like an android, Nagato proceeded to close the door.

"……"

Taking a swift glance at me and Asahina-san, it seemed that Nagato understood that she was intruding. Nevertheless, she said nothing and merely headed to her regular seat.

With her face devoid of any emotion, Nagato sat on her chair before pulling out a large hardcover from her bag. If she had shown any interest in me and Asahina-san staring face-to-face in an empty club room, it was far outweighed by that book which would be better off being called an encyclopedia, the title alone being enough to give anyone a headache.

Let's just ignore the fact of who reacted first. Asahina-san's actions would always be larger than mine, and consequently, more obvious.

"A-Ah, that's right. Tea. Let me make some tea."

As if wanting the entire world to know what she was about to do, Asahina-san deliberately raised her voice as she stumbled towards the kettle.

"Water, water."

Cradling the kettle in her arms, Asahina-san hurriedly opened the door to the refrigerator.

"Kyaa~ We're out of water… Not to worry, I'll go fetch some."

I stopped her, just as she was about to hurry out of the club room.

"Let me help you with that"

I stretched out my hand to retrieve the kettle from my senpai.

"It's already cold enough outside. Should you step out in that outfit, you'd inevitably poison other students' eyes. There's no need to provide free eye candy for anyone. The water fountain's just downstairs. I'll just go and get it…"

Upon hearing this, Asahina-san immediately said:

"A-ah, then I'll go with you."

Asahina-san looked at me with eyes like those of a cat being left alone in the rain. She is so cute! Cuteness aside, however, this was also quite a troubling situation. Even now Asahina-san is still not accustomed to being alone with Nagato-san. Someone should definitely break the ice between them. But come to think of it, having both an alien and a time-traveler co-exist together in a small club room was already quite an amazing feat. I suppose it all boils down to who's involved, huh?

Seeing that Asahina-san would rather follow me to fetch some water rather than stay in the club room alone with Nagato, I could find no reason to refuse her, even if I were to dig all the way to the Mohorovicic discontinuity to search for one. Of course, if it were Haruhi then things would be different. Heck, there wouldn't be any need to dig at all – all the reasons would come spewing out faster than an unearthed oil fountain. Luckily Haruhi wasn't around, or else I would probably suffer another series of mechanical pencil jabs.

With the kettle safely in my arms, I hummed to myself as I considered which route I should take to the water fountain. I finally decided to take the path to the Old Block, when…

"Ah…… Wait for me…"

Still clad in her maid uniform, Asahina-san stumbled along, like a young cat stubbornly clinging on to its mother.

Walking side by side with Asahina-san, I felt a sense of pride swelling up within me. Although it wasn't me who gave Asahina-san that perfect figure, those angelic features, or her charming personality, as far as I know, I was the only one to have ever been so close to her. Ahaha, what joy!

Too busy feeling pleased with myself, I totally forgot all about Asahina-san's melancholy. That's why—

"Kyon-kun."

Just as I started filling the kettle with water—

"Are you free this Sunday? There's a place I would like to visit with you."

Asahina-san's tone was dead serious. At the same time, I was so shocked by her statement that no modern calculating device could determine the exact value of my surprise. For a moment, I totally forgot what day today was, and how many days it would take to reach Sunday. After much effort, I finally managed to croak out……

"Sure"

Even if I had something to do this Sunday, at Asahina-san's invitation, all the red markings on my calendar had magically disappeared. Even if she requested we meet on the 29th of February, I would still be there. Who cares about something as trivial as a leap year?

“Yeah, I guess I’m kinda free.”

After forcing out those words, shrouds of mist began to slowly rise in my heart.

—- Haven’t I heard this somewhere before?

But then again, at that time we were traveling to three years ago. Time travel gets kinda boring after a while, you know? Sure, it may seem fun at first, but frequently hopping from past to future and vice versa, one has to wonder if one’s appetite grows larger after time travel.

“Please don’t worry.”

Asahina-san had subconsciously picked up the kettle, and had started playing with it. Her eyelids were drooping, as she casually watched the flow of tap water.

“This time I’m not going to the past, nor the future. Actually, all I wanted was to get some tea leaves from the local supermarket. Kyon-kun, would you care to accompany me?”

Asahina-san then proceeded to reduce her voice to barely audible levels, and placed her index finger on her cherry lips.

“Keep this a secret from everyone…… Okay?”

My chest once again swelled with pride, filled with so much confidence that I reckon I would still be able to tell a straight out lie after a full dose of Veritaserum.

The days, hours, minutes and even seconds that soon followed never felt longer. Why is it that the more you stare at the clock, the slower it moves, as if intentionally mocking you? Could it have, by any chance, decided to take a holiday while I wasn’t looking? Even shaking the clock with my hands didn’t seem to speed up the movement of the accursed second hand. I finally realized how powerless we humans truly were subjected to the slow passing of time, as our dull and tasteless life slowly drifts by.

Nevertheless, this was the first time I had an ordinary, time-unrelated outing with a time traveler, for the sole purpose of purchasing tea leaves. Now I’d been thinking these past couple of days (since there was obviously no better way of passing time). I didn’t think Asahina-san was one to have any problems doing the shopping all by herself, and she definitely wasn’t so indecisive as to need help deciding what brand of tea leaves to buy. Even if she bought the worst tea leaves available in the market and produced a cup of totally horrible tea, I would probably still enjoy it. And the rest of the SOS Brigade wasn’t that picky either.

If so, what did Asahina-san invite me out for? And why so mysteriously?

A boy and a girl, of similar age, walking together on a Sunday.

That is to say, would that be what normal humans consider a date? Hmm, I can't think of any other explanation. Yeah, it's a date alright, just as I thought. Choosing tea leaves was just an excuse, after all. Aww, you didn't need to be so mysterious. Couldn't you have just told me right then? No, wait, this is how it should be. Otherwise, it wouldn't be Asahina-san.

With those thoughts in mind, Sunday finally came.

I pedalled my bike furiously as I sped towards the agreed meeting spot before the train station. My trusty bike seemed to understand how I felt, as even without a motor, the pedals spun shockingly fast. This was probably the first time I had looked forward to a meeting ever since I joined the SOS Brigade, because this was an extremely ordinary outing. The destination was not a sealed space with blue giants, the tickets weren't tickets to the future, and the mode of transport definitely wasn't a UFO.

Unless the one waiting before the station was the elder version of Asahina-san, with that secretive smile that screamed of a hidden motive, now that would be a different story.

No matter how you look at it, I'm still a high school student with a moderate amount of intelligence. Thanks to that and my past few experiences, I could more or less predict how the future would turn out. Asahina-san (big) was no exception. She would appear whenever I got the feeling that she would. So even if she showed up today, I would not be surprised….

"No way!"

I forcefully parked my bike in the shade of the power poles, before proceeding to lecture myself.

Even my thoughts had become biased! If things carried on like this, even if something did happen, I'd still remain perfectly calm. And that wasn't good, either. The only person who can stare something weird in the face and remain perfectly calm is someone who's missing a few screws in his brain. I want to be a normal person, or at least someone who's mentally sane! Although it may already be too late for that, I should at least smile when it's the time to smile. Now was definitely one of those moments.

So, I tried my best, and forced myself to smile.

The Asahina-san standing at the usual SOS Brigade meeting spot today was none other than my favorite version of Asahina-san.

Standing amidst a busy crowd, she waved furiously at me with that tiny, lily hand of hers. That pose was enough to melt anyone's heart.

Sporting a simple yet elegant outfit, with a different hairstyle, she was like a girl trying eagerly to blossom into womanhood. Seeing such a change in her, I was moved to the point of tears.

Faced with an elegantly dressed Asahina-san, I hastily pulled my bike to a halt, and revealed a Koizumi-style smile, which I had rehearsed over and over in the mirror.

"Sorry I'm late."

Although there was still 15 minutes till the agreed time.

"It's okay……"

Asahina-san breathed a sigh of relief, as she lowered her gaze to the ground.

"I just arrived too."

That was followed with a smile.

"Alright, let's get going!"

Asahina-san stepped forward, as her hair gently bobbed up and down.

Looking at Asahina-san with her hair tied up, an indescribable feeling slowly welled up in my heart. I was like one of those loyal knights in your typical RPGs, with a sworn duty to protect a princess who had to flee the palace due to inner conflict in the royal court and wander all over the world.

Asahina-san's tiny footsteps, coupled with her childlike features, made me wonder, was she really a year older than me? Her footsteps could easily compare to my sister's, and to top it off, she was still very young-looking. Looking down at her small footsteps, an urge to protect her swelled up in my chest, so much so that I feared that if she turned back to look at me with those big, round eyes of hers, even she would feel uncomfortable.

I mean, every single one of my actions was different compared to my usual self. Being cooped up in a small, awkward room together with the eccentric Haruhi, smiling Koizumi and silent Nagato, my actions were usually half-hearted and often chaotic. Now, there was only Asahina-san and me. Better still, no one knew about it. The tyrannical brigade commander, the reliable alien, and even the esper weren't here. This was quite the change.

I really wanted to announce this at the top of my lungs: Deciding to go out with Asahina-san alone is the best decision I have ever made in my life!

To tell you the truth, I was happy. Very happy. Walking side by side with one of North High's most beautiful students, even if someone chucked my Purple Diploma into the gutter, I would still not feel any sense of regret, seeing that the diploma was issued by a country that wasn't renowned for literature anyway.

We were headed to the mall near the train station.

Sometimes, having nothing better to do, I would accompany my family here to do the shopping. This mall mostly sold food and apparel, and it also had a large bookstore inside. However, that was Nagato's field of specialty, not mine. As I expected, Asahina-san took me to the lower level, where the food was sold.

Beyond a row of shining ATMs was the store we were headed to. Specializing in dealing nothing but tea leaves, the racks inside were filled with all sorts of different kinds.

"Good afternoon."

At the sound of Asahina-san's cute greeting, the shop owner's face immediately cracked a smile that resembled bitumen melting on a hot summer's day.

"Welcome, thanks for visiting us again."

It seems that Asahina-san had already become a regular at this shop, and was on friendly terms with the shop owner.

"Ehh… Which type should I buy?"

Asahina-san muttered to herself, while surveying the different type of tea leaves printed on a large poster hanging by the wall, complete with their corresponding names and prices.

Of course, my knowledge of tea leaves was less than Asahina-san's, so I was unable to give her any suggestions. I stood silently by her side as I inhaled the different aromas and fragrances of the various tea leaves, my nose itching wildly in the process.

Turning serious at the topic of tea leaves, Asahina-san discussed with the shop owner the various methods of brewing tea, from the amount of leaves to the time required. I stood there listening, with nothing much to do or say, like a scarecrow after harvest.

The only one who ever gave any comments on Asahina-san's tea was me. Haruhi would usually down the entire cup in a single gulp, probably not even noticing whether it was tea or not, while I can't even confirm if Nagato has any taste buds or not. Koizumi rarely voices his opinion on any matter anyways, so the only one left was me.

I had already sworn that I would drink any tea that Asahina-san prepared, even if it was a silver goblet of hemlock. Seeking aid right after drinking should allow me to live to tell the tale. Most importantly, Asahina-san's feelings would not be hurt.

Seeing that I had no advice to offer whatsoever, I continued to stand idly by the door, playing the role of Asahina-san's chaperone. It was not until Asahina-san finally made her decision and

bought the type known as “High-classed-goddess” or something that I finally stopped standing guard like a sentry.

“It’s such a rare chance that we get to come out together—-”

Asahina-san looked at me with even politer eyes than usual.

“Do you want to come in and drink some tea? The dango they serve here is quite tasty. We could ask the shop owner to help brew the tea leaves we just bought earlier……”

Even by the time all the hydrogen in the sun had been consumed and turned into helium, I would still be unable to find a reason to refuse her offer. In a simple shop like this, it was surprising that tables and chairs were prepared, as if telling me to come in and sit down. Without a second thought, I followed Asahina-san into the store and sat down, as the aroma of freshly brewed tea soon filled my nostrils.

There was one thing which I greatly missed.

Asahina-san seemed to care a lot about the time, as she frequently shot glances at her watch, unable to calm down and enjoy her tea. Her actions, however, didn’t seem deliberate, and it was as if she was trying to hide it from me. My apologies, Asahina-san, but no matter how much you try to hide it, I can still notice. Because apart from looking at the time, you seem to be sighing every time you glance at your watch. Something must be bothering her.

“The dango here is tasty, and the tea is also sweet smelling, just as expected from Asahina-san. Hmm… this is really delicious.”

Even so, I pretended not to notice Asahina-san’s nervousness. I really must desist from praising myself for being such a kind and thoughtful soul. Oops, I’m sorry. Is it already too late?

“Hmm…”

Asahina-san took a bite from her dango, before glancing at her watch again.

I suddenly had a bad feeling, like the calm before the storm.

That’s right; this whole ordeal was fishy from the start. The fact that I was going out with one of the top three beauties in North High, who, even in that cute winter outfit, failed to conceal that hot body beneath it, would be enough to propel anyone to the roof of the school hostel and yell about it at the top of their lungs.

I drank my cup of tea, and as the hot fluid slowly flowed down my digestive system, my suspicion began to grow thicker and thicker.

There must be a catch.

My analysis of past experiences and data has proven that the only upperclassman in the SOS Brigade, Asahina Mikuru-san, is indeed a time traveler. She was sent here from the future for some reason, which unfortunately remains classified information. As for how she became the SOS Brigade's official mascot, well, that was all due to Haruhi's tyrannical ways. It definitely has nothing to do with her original assignment.

That's right. Observing Haruhi is her official assignment. She's also in charge of bringing me to the past and the future, in order to trigger future events or to clean up the mess my past self has unknowingly created. Those were the assignments her superiors gave her. No matter how you think of it, that more or less resembles her true mission.

So the question is, was today's date an assignment too? Was the whole tea leaves choosing business meant to camouflage the true purpose of events that were about to happen? Did Asahina-san know from the very start? Come to think of it, that expression on her face kinda gave everything away……

After finishing our dango, Asahina-san insisted on paying on her own.

"It's okay, since it was me who asked you out in the first place."

Even so, I can't let you spend so easily.

"It's really alright. You treat us every time anyway."

That's because that idiot Haruhi made a self-proclaimed rule that the last one to arrive would be the one who would treat the entire brigade to a meal, and, for some unknown reason, the last person to arrive is always me. In the end, I was the one to settle the bill, something you don't see outside the SOS Brigade. Today was different, though, and maybe it was due to the rare chance that the both of us got to go out alone, all the bills stuffed in my wallet seemed to be screaming to be let out. Perhaps they thought being spent this way would be more meaningful.

"Let me settle this bill for once."

Asahina-san looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Pretty please?"

The expression Asahina-san wore was so genuine, I naturally nodded my head in agreement.

After that, Asahina-san and I left the supermarket. Seeing that the both of us had nowhere else to go, we stood transfixed on the spot, under the harsh, winter sky, staring at the crowd that passed before us.

The phrase “Well, see you tomorrow” is generally used when you want to take leave after everything is done, but even then it still seems ungentlemanly. Of course, I’m not the type of guy that would bolt once my job was done, and furthermore, it was still a long time before the sun set. A month has passed since winter, meaning that the sun should set really, really late……

“Accompany me for a walk, okay? Kyon-kun……”

Those pleading eyes again! Faced with those facial expressions and a voice that would make anyone’s knees turn into jelly, I found myself in no position to disagree.

Asahina-san revealed a divine, aurora-like smile.

“Come on, let’s go this way.”

Without further hesitation, Asahina-san began walking. What a pity. I had secretly hoped Asahina-san would grab my hand as she walked. Seems like I had my hopes too high.

With the winter breeze beating softly upon my shoulders, I chased after Asahina-san’s petite figure.

And just like that, the both of us strolled for quite some time.

Asahina-san seemed to have decided the destination right from the beginning, as she shot occasional side glances at me, trying to ascertain whether I was there or not, since I followed her without making a sound.

I kept my lips tightly sealed, as I followed Asahina-san’s footsteps. Many questions were flooding my mind. The more I thought of it, the weirder today’s Asahina-san seemed to be.

Err, how should I put it? The usual Asahina-san was a weak, pitiful little girl that would unconsciously stir up the desire to protect her in every man’s heart, and her cute little movements were enough to make anyone’s lips curl upwards into a smile. Today, however, her every movement resembled mine during a physics pop quiz.

Not to mention that she would nervously look around as she walked.

It’s as if she was afraid someone was staring at her… Wait, that’s not right either. Asahina-san wasn’t paying attention to her back, nor her front, but rather, her sides, like an elementary school girl looking for a missed checkpoint during orienteering. If she wasn’t the cute, doll-faced beauty she was now, but rather a middle aged man, she would probably be arrested by the cops for acting suspicious in the middle of broad daylight. Even if she did get arrested, with her absolute charm, any offense on her part would be easily pardoned. But that wasn’t the point.

Asahina-san’s actions were absolutely suspicious.

I suddenly felt a sense of nostalgia, as I slowed down my steps.

No, nostalgia shouldn't be the word to use, since I was used to playing here ever since I was born. I should have been sick of the same scenery by now, but why—

"Ahh…"

Now I get it.

Ever since I had begun walking here from the train station, I had felt a sense of familiarity, as well as one of nostalgia. I finally understood why.

I mean, the first city-wide search for mysterious events conducted by Haruhi was one event that remained deeply etched into my mind even today. Especially the memory of Asahina-san and I being paired together, now that was sweet. Even if I fractured my skull and had amnesia, I would still be unable to forget that memorable incident.

That's right. That was the same path as the one I was walking down now, of course I would feel nostalgic! Even the circumstances were similar! Although it hadn't even been a year since that incident I felt as if 800 years had passed since then.

Asahina-san's true identity as a time-traveler was already set into solid stone right now, but back then I didn't have a single clue. Not until she revealed it to me as we sat on the benches by the cherry blossom trees did I realize she wasn't the simple, innocent, doll-faced, well-endowed SOS Brigade mascot she had appeared to be.

That was all now a thing of the past. No wonder I had felt nostalgic.

Just like I expected, Asahina-san was indeed headed to the place I had in mind. The only difference from before is that aside from glancing side to side like a herbivore looking out for predators, she was now earnestly looking at her watch.

Even if I had called out to her, I feared that it would have no effect whatsoever on her, as she continued her zombie-like stroll.

Breathing out countless white clouds from our mouths, the both of us silently made our way forward, until we had finally reached our destination.

The path of cherry blossoms by the river bank.

Even if there was some chance the cherry trees could manage to keep their flowers until summer, it would take a miracle for cherry blossoms to blossom during winter.

Although our bodies made contact, Asahina-san seemed not to care. Even after passing the bench where she dropped that "I am a time traveler" bombshell last year, she seemed not to care. It was obvious Asahina-san had lots of things on her mind right now. Just what was troubling her?

Feeling lonely all of a sudden, I then heard a soft muttering:

"Isn't it time yet……"

Asahina-san once again looked at her watch.

"It should happen any time now, but…"

Seeming to not realize that she was talking to her self, Asahina-san let out a sigh, and once again continued to look to her left and her right.

I pretended to not notice, and concentrated on the path below me instead.

Sigh. All of a sudden, all the enthusiasm I had for this date had completely vanished, even though a romantic stroll was supposed to be a lovers' rendezvous. Ah forget it. I suppose that's what life's about anyway.

Forget the cherry blossoms, not even a single leaf could be found on the cherry blossom trees. Soon, even the trees themselves were far behind us.

Asahina-san continued to walk forward in the upstream direction. Should we continue along this path, Nagato's apartment would undoubtedly come into view. Should we go even further, we may even reach North High.

Thanks to our "walk", my body had begun to feel warm. It's a pity that the warmth wasn't induced by having Asahina-san beside me.

Finally, we left the river bank, and proceeded in the direction of the train tracks. Oh yes, I remember walking together with Haruhi along this route too.

With memories constantly resurfacing in my mind, even I had begun to feel a little uneasy.

"Kyon-kun, over here!"

"Huh?"

If Asahina-san hadn't tugged at my sleeve, I would have probably kept walking straight and not even noticed.

"We need to wait to cross the street."

Without realizing it, we had already arrived at the crossroads situated near the train tracks. Asahina-san pointed to the opposite side of the street. The pedestrian traffic light by the zebra crossings showed a red figure.

“Oh… I’m sorry.”

I immediately apologized, as I returned to Asahina-san’s side. Even though the road was quiet and devoid of any cars, Asahina-san had insisted on waiting until the light turned green. Ah, now that was more like the Asahina-san I knew.

Not even 10 seconds later, the traffic lights turned from green to red, as the pedestrian light flashed a healthy green.

Asahina-san and I made it across the road at the same time.

Just then—-

A dark shadow suddenly appeared behind my back.

“Ahh…”

This small scream was made by Asahina-san.

The shadow ignored us and ran onto the zebra crossings. From the looks of it, it was probably an elementary school kid, who should be around my sister’s age – A bespectacled, feisty fourth or fifth grader.

“Ahh!!”

This loud scream was also made by Asahina-san, and was also accompanied by a series of loud and chaotic noises which made my eyes bulge.

A large vehicle was coming down the center of the road at high speed, with its tires firmly glued to the ground. Even if the traffic lights were currently a blaring red, the vehicle (an emerald green van) was sharply juxtaposing the color of the traffic lights the driver had conveniently failed to notice, as he continued to speed forward into the zebra crossing, with absolutely no signs of slowing down.

At that time —-

The school kid who had charged into the middle of the road finally noticed that he was in danger, as he stopped dead in his tracks.

The vehicle was fast approaching. The driver, who had decided to ignore the traffic lights, had apparently no respect for traffic rules either. An image of the young kid being run over by the van flashed into my mind, but at the same time, my body was already leaping into action.

“You bastard!”

I have no idea if the insult was directed at the kid or the driver. All I know is that I had rushed forward, as the world around me slowed down as if in bullet time. From a third person’s point of view, however, everything probably happened in an instant.

“Uwaaaaa!”

It was a good thing I got there in time. Grabbing the motionless boy by the collar, I slung him forward with full force. Devoid of momentum, I fell down to the pavement.

The furiously speeding van was past me in a flash.

I could feel cold sweat trickling down my face.

That was close, too close for comfort. The renegade van had missed me by mere centimeters. If I had been only the slightest bit closer, my foot would probably be as flat as the bottom of my shoe right now.

Throughout winter, my body had barely sweated. Now, no thanks to the driver, I found my whole body sweating furiously. It was too hot to bear.

“You f@#%ing bastard!!”

Even though I didn’t know who was driving the van, I felt my temper rising all the way to my temple, as I shot a killer glance at the speeding van and swore loudly.

“Don’t you know how to drive?! It’s bad enough to beat the red lights, but accelerating in a pedestrian crossing zone? Are you retarded? Are you trying to kill someone or something? Asahina-san, did you happen to see his license plate number?”

Since I was too busy falling together with the young boy, it was only natural that I failed to see his license plate. I looked at Asahina-san, hoping that she had noticed—-

“Now I see…”

Huh? See what?

A dumbstruck Asahina-san stood there with her eyes opened wide, not even moving an inch. Oh well, that’s to be expected. It’s only natural that one would be shocked witnessing an accident first hand. But that’s not what surprised me.

What surprised me was that Asahina-san not only wore an expression of shock, but also…

“Now I see… So that’s why… That’s why I was sent here…”

Mumbling to herself, Asahina-san looked at the young lad who had nearly lost his life.

Her angelic features were mingled with relief, as if finally understanding everything.

Not knowing what was going on, I continued to lie on the road, as Asahina-san strode over to us like a zombie, her face as pale as a sheet. It’s a pity she wasn’t headed towards me. Her gaze was fixed on the young chap beside me, who too had his buttocks glued to the ground.

Perhaps it was due to that close encounter, the bespectacled young boy also wore an expression full of shock, his face as pale as Asahina-sans’. It was not until Asahina-san approached him that he blinked in surprise.

“Are you hurt?”

Asahina-san knelt beside us on the road, and placed her hands on the boy. The boy slowly shook his head like an android. Asahina-san’s next question, though, caught me totally off-guard.

“If so, can you tell me your name?”

I had no idea why Asahina-san was interested in knowing his name. After all, what was the point of it? The boy, though, honestly answered her question.

I’m pretty sure I had not heard his name before, as I hadn’t the faintest memory of him or his name. Asahina-san, however, seemed to have different ears than mine.

Even before he had finished mentioning his name, Asahina-san had stopped breathing; she did a faithful parody of Nagato, kneeling there without moving, her eyes staring directly at the boy’s face. It wasn’t until he had finished that Asahina-san take a deep breath, and said:

“I see, so you are…”

The young boy’s mouth hung wide open. After narrowly avoiding being run over by a renegade truck, he was now approached by a beautiful girl who asked him for his name. No matter who it was, the experience was enough to freak anybody out. I understand what you’re going through, glasses-boy.

However, Asahina-san appeared dead serious.

“Then, you have to promise me—-”

The look of anxiety she wore on her face was one I had never seen before.

“No matter what happens, you have to look out for cars. Be it on the road, or when boarding a public vehicle, or in an airplane, or a train, or even a boat… Be careful not to trip or fall… And

don’t drown. Please, no matter where or when, be sure to take care of yourself, okay? Can you promise me that much?”

The boy must have been shocked, because I certainly was. You don’t have to be that direct, Asahina-san, and even if you did, couldn’t you have at least toned it down a little?

“Pretty please…?”

Hearing a tear-faced Asahina-san trying to sound as sincere as possible, I made up my mind to shout “YES, MADAM!” in the young lad’s place. Just as I was about to do so……

“Okay,”

The young boy nodded and promised her. He continued to stare at Asahina-san, looking as confused as I was.

“I’ll be careful.”

He said each word stiffly, as his head bobbed up and down endlessly, which resembled Humpty-Dumpty sitting on his wall.

Asahina-san was apparently still not satisfied, as she stretched out her pinky.

“Let’s make a pinky promise then.”

Looking at a stuttering boy make a pinky promise with Asahina-san, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I believe it was something called jealousy. I had privately hoped and wished that I was the only person allowed to do that. But seeing that he was just a kid after all, I decided not to fake a fall in order to disturb them. I breathed a sigh of relief as Asahina-san finally stood up. It seems I’m far from reaching maturity, after all. Is that good or bad? Don’t ask me, even I don’t know.

But just then, I thought of another way to disturb them. Pointing at the traffic light, I said:

“Asahina-san, the light’s turning green anytime soon. It’s dangerous to remain in the center of the road.

The green pedestrian light had begun to flash rapidly.

“Ok.”

Even as she stood up, Asahina-san continued to eye the bespectacled boy. As if realizing this, the young boy lowered his head and avoided her gaze.

“Thanks for saving me at the nick of time. I’ll be careful in the future.”

Then, with an air of politeness, he said,

“Well then, I should get going soon.”

After bowing from his waist towards us, he trotted across the street, and disappeared without a trace.

Asahina-san stood there unmoving. Her eyes were still glued to her precious little gemstone, as she continued to look in his direction even after he had disappeared from our sight.

I couldn’t take it any longer.

“Asahina-san, the light has already turned red. We should hurry.”

I forcefully pulled the beauty dressed in a winter outfit off the street. As I slowly shook her by her shoulder, I realized that her soft body was similar to that of Shamisens’, who had for some reason decided to share a bed with me. Wrapping my arms tightly around her must undoubtedly feel great, especially in a moment like this. But of course I wouldn’t do something like that.

As the light turned completely red—-

“Sob…”

The sound came from somewhere positioned diagonally below me. The source was Asahina-san, and the reason it came out all muffled was probably due to her burying her face on my shoulder.

What the? —- This was what I first thought.

Asahina-san’s face was buried on my shoulder, as her own shoulders trembled furiously. It didn’t seem like she was laughing.

“Sob, sob…”

A trail of crystal clear tears flowed out of her tightly shut eyes, moistening my shirt. Asahina-san then grabbed on to me like a little girl, her tears flowing continuously down her porcelain cheeks.

“Wh… What’s the matter, Asahina-san?! Say something! Asahina-san?!”

I had been in a couple of sticky situations in the past, but this was undoubtedly the stickiest situation I had ever been in. Why is Asahina-san crying? That young boy was saved, isn’t that supposed to be a good thing? It’s not like anyone died… You should be happy now, not crying your eyes out. Or was the impact of the entire incident too great for Asahina-san to bear? Is she developing symptoms of shock?

“That’s not it.”

Asahina-san said through her sobs.

"…… I feel useless. I k-know nothing… I c-can't do a-anything…"

I'm even more confused now.

Even then all she did was cry furiously, as if losing all will to speak. Just like how Shamisen clawed at me whenever I picked him up in fear of falling, Asahina-san clawed at my shirt, clinging on to it tightly, as she continued to bury her face in it.

What's going on here?

My brain resembled a miniature whirlpool. There was only one thing I was certain of.

Today's activities had finally come to an end. This date-like invitation initiated by Asahina-san herself had finally gone in a huge circle, and ended where it had started, in a grand fashion.

This was a conclusion anyone could reach, even without the deductive mind of Koizumi Itsuki.

I knew that I couldn't stand there forever, being clawed by a crying sempai under the winter sky.

This was because many casual pedestrians had already slowed down their steps, and directed their gaze to the odd couple standing by the street. What are you people doing outside in this cold weather?

"Asahina-san, we should find a place to sit, a place where you can calm down… Err, can you walk on your own?"

Although she still insisted on burying her face on my shoulder, she nevertheless gave a weak nod.

I stepped very carefully, trying my best to match Asahina-san's depressed footsteps. Walking beside a sniveling Asahina-san, I slowed down my footsteps, while silently lamenting my fate. It was what I always wanted, and not. Sigh. Now the only thing I hope for is to not be noticed by any boys from North High. If word got out that I made Asahina-san cry, the whole Asahina Mikuru cult following might very well be after my head.

"Where should we go then…"

A place where we would not draw too much attention, get a good rest as well as get out of the cold, did such a place exist? The only place that I could think of would be the café. However, sitting opposite a crying girl in a café was almost the equivalent of suicide.

Actually, I had noticed that the building near the street where this entire incident took place happened to be Nagato's apartment. If I were to ask her, she would have probably opened the door for us, but my instincts told me it was better not to do so.

So, there was only one place left to go. The holy grounds located near Nagato's apartment, the park which held many fond memories. Seeing that we had already passed the bench by the river bank, and the urgency of the situation, it would only be appropriate that we use that OTHER bench, which held even more memories.

At least we would be able to rest our tired legs there. Who knows, maybe someone would even pop out from the bushes behind.

With weather cold enough to freeze anyone to death, it's no wonder no one bothered to visit the park. As expected, that bench remained empty, enjoying the harsh winter winds by itself.

I sat Asahina-san down on the bench, before sitting down beside her, ensuring that there was a small gap between us. Sneaking a glance at her face, I noticed that she still had two trails of tears down her porcelain face.

I rummaged through my pockets, searching for a handkerchief, but alas, all my hands felt were the fabric used to make my clothes. Damn, how could I forget to bring them today? What could I use in place of a handkerchief to wipe away Asahina-san's pearl-like tears? Just as I was panicking, and on the verge of tearing off my sleeve—-

Thunk.

Something soft suddenly fell lightly upon my shoulders. That soft something was none other than Asahina-san's neck. After round one of sobbing in the streets, was she coming back for round two? The way she rested her head upon my shoulder truly touched my heart. However, I refrained myself from making any sudden movements, in fear of causing a misunderstanding. That's because this situation greatly resembles that time. I had been flicked on my forehead once, I don't want something similar to happen again this time.

"I'll go get some coffee for you, okay?"

I had thought that this was a brilliant idea, but to my surprise, Asahina-san gently shook her head.

"Or would you like some oolong tea?"

The maroon head of hair once again shook sideways.

I tried my best to picture the automated drinks vendor's menu in my head, as I continued to ask.

"Then what about—-"

"……I'm sorry."

A weak voice finally reached my ears. Asahina-san still had her head on my shoulder, and as a result I couldn't see her face. But even without looking, I could probably guess what expression she had on her face right now. When Asahina-san apologizes, it means that she's really sorry.

I decided to remain silent, and let Asahina-san do the talking.

"The reason I invited you out was to save that boy. I too had no clue earlier, but now I finally understand. It's all for this, and this only…"

Alright, go on.

"F-following the orders of my superiors, I asked you out. The time, place and even the places we should visit, I was merely following orders. It was all to protect that boy, to see to it that that accident would not happen… That was my mission."

Superiors? Asahina-san (big)'s secretive smiled drifted into my mind.

"Wait a second. If that's the case, you could have asked your superiors to make things a little clearer. Like for instance, stand guard at that crossroad at this specific time, your mission is to protect this kid known as blablabla from an accident. Wouldn't that be better?"

"Well… I also wish for clearer orders from my superiors. The problem is that they refuse. They refuse to let me know anything. It must be because I'm not capable enough…… Just like today, all I could do was follow orders…"

Once again, Asahina-san (big) flashed into my mind.

"You shouldn't think like that…"

After hearing me utter out that statement, the head of long, maroon hair shook violently, the hardest it had shook the entire day.

"No, that must be it! Why else would they lay such an important mission on my shoulders without telling me beforehand? It must be because I'm so useless……"

After that, she fell silent, as the breaths of white air coming out from her mouth, which had disappeared as she was talking a moment ago, once again returned. It seems her mood tallies with the topic.

"Asahina-san, who was that kid?"

Her nose still making loud sniveling noises, Asahina-san paused for a while before saying:

"…… That little boy is a very important person in the future. It's all because of him that I'm able to come here. If he were to die, everything would be over…"

Her voice grew softer and softer, until it was on the verge of vanishing completely.

"I'm sorry… I can't tell you any more than that…"

In other words, that unknown kid could not die now at any cost. In order to prevent this from happening, Asahina-san was sent to lead me to that place —- That was the true rescue plan.

If I had been only a second too late in grabbing that kid away, he would have been plowed straight into by that van. I'm afraid I didn't know how things would've turned out then, but I daresay they wouldn't have been pretty. Without this minor miracle, the probability of that kid saying goodbye to this world would've been very high.

"Eh?"

Wait a second, which was the true turn of events? I saved that kid alright, that was what just happened. Then, what about the future? In the future Asahina-san had come from, wouldn't this kid be already dead in the first place? But since that was a no-no, the time travelers decided to send Asahina-san to protect him…

No, that's not right. Something's weird.

I saved that kid, meaning that he successfully avoided being run over, that should be what really happened. That is to say that in the true turn of events, the kid never ever met with an accident. Otherwise, Asahina-san would be unable to come here from the distant future. But if he never met with an accident, there wouldn't be a point in sending Asahina-san to the past to save him. But that would result in the kid being run over by the truck, and if he got run over by a truck, then he wouldn't have been able to make time travel possible. Which is to say …

"Ouch, my head hurts…"

My brain started to ache.

No matter how you thought about it, something wasn't right. Whenever I thought about anything that was above my level, you would probably be able to smell the scent of something burning coming out from my ears.

"I don't get it at all."

I might just as well ask.

"Did that kid truly meet with an accident? Which is the true turn of events? I'm really confused now."

Asahina-san shook her head, and said in a mysterious voice:

“We are not the only ones from the future.”

“There are others who do not wish for the existence of time travelers, or the possibility of time travel.”

An emerald green van. Driven by a driver full of killing intent.

“You don’t mean to tell me……”

I didn’t need to wait for her answer. Even past experiences pointed to the same thing.

One similar person was Asakura Ryouko. Although she was also an organic living interface created by the Integrated Data Sentient Entity like Nagato, the two of them seemed to have different opinions on Haruhi. It wouldn’t be a surprise if they came from totally different factions.

Also there was the other group aside from the “Organization” that Koizumi had mentioned earlier. Koizumi had mentioned that these two factions were currently at odds with each other.

Finally there was whoever had made the freshest memories in my mind, the faction who planned the entire Snow Mountain incident. They even created a sealed space so strong even Nagato had failed to destroy it. “Our” (Referring to the SOS Brigade) Enemy – That’s what Koizumi called them.

After such a short period of time, are your hands itching again? The Enemy. What an annoying name.

Those who planned on killing an otherwise happy, young lad who would one day contribute greatly to mankind, what were they thinking? Those who insisted on making the young lad’s life miserable, where were they hiding?

There are others who do not wish for the existence of time travelers, of the possibility of time travel.

Who do you mean by “others”?

“That’s…”

Asahina-san’s cherry lips slowly trembled. For a moment, it appeared that she was about to say something, but she finally decided not to say anything, as she kept her lips tightly shut.

“… I can’t tell you that yet.”

With that, she once again entered her sniveling state.

“That’s why I feel as if I’m useless. It’s the truth. I really am useless. I can’t do anything to help you. I can’t even help you understand. I’m really worthless.”

That’s not true.

Asahina-san, you’re not the least bit useless at all. It’s the restrictions that have been placed upon you that have made you unable to shine. And the one who’s placing those restrictions on you, is none other than the future version of yourself.

But of course, I couldn’t tell her that.

This I promised Asahina-san (Big) on the first 7th of July. We even made a pinky promise.

“Please don’t let her know about my existence.”

As for how long I should keep this promise, I had no idea. And since I had no idea, I should probably stick to keeping it a secret from Asahina-san herself. Even I didn’t know why was I being so stubborn. But I had a feeling that it would be better not to say anything for the time being.

I wonder what she thinks of me for being silent? Asahina-san continued, in a depressed voice:

“It’s just like what happened just now. You were the one who saved that kid, Kyon-kun. We time travelers are prohibited from getting involved directly in any incidents concerning the past…”

Is that so?

“The only ones who can alter the past, are the ones who live in it. Anything other than that is strictly against the rules……”

So that’s why you needed my help?

“It’s what my superiors told me to do. All I did was follow instructions, even though I didn’t know why I had to act that way. Thinking of this, I feel like… an idiot.”

You are no such thing.

“I’ve always hoped that my superiors could tell me more. That’s why I wrote many letters to them, but they were always refused. My superiors must really feel that I’m useless. That must be it.”

I’ve told you that’s not the case.

I couldn’t bear watching this, as I finally opened my mouth and said:

“Asahina-san, you’re definitely not useless. The truth is, you’ve done a lot, no matter whether it’s for me, the SOS Brigade, or even the whole world, so don’t fret over it.”

Asahina-san suddenly lifted her head and looked at me, but then she quickly averted her tearful gaze to the floor.

“…… But, the only thing I’ve done is dress up. It’s the only thing I’m capable of…” Her voice was really depressed. “And even…… During “that time”, I had no clue what was going on……”

This I could finally understand. “On the 18th of December”—-

“That’s not true!”

For someone like me, my attitude could be considered quite serious right now. Apparently Asahina-san had the same thoughts in mind, as she raised her head, as if startled by my sudden shout.

I can swear, Asahina-san, you’re more than just a tea serving mascot. Images of Asahina-san (big) surfaced in my mind.

Snow White. It was thanks to her hint that I was able to return from that Sealed Space.

7th July, three years ago. After going back in time with Asahina-san, I got a hint from Asahina-san (big) as to what to do, before finally seeking Nagato’s aid.

And then, when reality was altered, she was the one who helped restore it——

That’s right, I haven’t told them in full about that incident yet, maybe because it’s probably too much for them to digest. I plan to wait until some time had passed before I tell them. I just told them briefly that we were going to save the world. The three of us, Nagato, Asahina-san, and I, then went back to that time where I encounter a dying “me” on the ground and Nagato’s “alternate” form, before putting everything to an end. I believe that this event remains fresh in Asahina-san’s memory. The only difference is that she, unlike me and Nagato, won’t notice a future version of herself. This was what Asahina-san (big) had planned.

I dare say that both small and large versions of Asahina-san were the Asahina-san I knew, and not the “altered” version of Asahina-san who didn’t even recognize me. In Nagato’s words, both of different times but of the same entity. Or something like that.

This Asahina-san was just acting according to her orders, but deep down I knew that the one who was issuing these orders was none other than the elder version of Asahina-san herself. Asahina-san (big) should know what should be done and what should not. I mean, it’s her own self we’re talking about.

If it was anything that Asahina-san (small) should know, she would have told her in the first place. Seeing that Asahina-san had not revealed anything, I thought it was best that I kept quiet. “At least, don’t let her know who was there in the first place.” This was what Asahina-san (big) had asked of me.

Of course, I could tell you that in the near future, you would become an even more beautiful woman than now, and even cross the boundaries of time and space in order to assist me. It would be no difficult task to me. For example, during the second time I returned to the 7th of July three years ago, I could have easily awakened the “me” sleeping on the bench, and spat out everything I knew. In other words, to tell or not to tell, it was all up to me, as simple as that.

But of course I didn’t do that. Although no one told me I couldn’t do that, it was specifically because no one had told me I could do that that I didn’t do that. Thinking back about it, I feel as if I’ve made the right choice.

One day, this little version of Asahina-san will go back to the future, before returning as the elder version of Asahina-san to once again assist us. Although the current Asahina-san was an indispensable treasure to the SOS Brigade, as well as the club room’s private maid, there would come a day when she would have to return anyway. Everything was tightly connected. Only with the present could there be the future. If the present was mingled with all sorts of other foreign matter, who knows what the future will turn out to be—

I suddenly realized something.

“That’s right!”

I wanted to open my mouth and spill everything out, but I knew I couldn’t. My desire to do so conflicted with my better sense of judgement – I finally understood what it felt like. So that’s how it feels.

Thinking about what happened last summer, during the first city-wide search for mysterious events, Asahina-san and I had walked side-by-side to the row of cherry blossom trees by the riverbank, where she revealed to me her true identity as a time traveler and tried to explain the concepts behind time travel. Of course, whether that counts as an explanation, I have no idea. All I know is that it had something to do with time planes, cartoons and drawings, while having nothing to do with water.

At that time, no matter what I asked, her answer would always be:

“Classified information.”

What I’m going through now should be roughly what she went through then. That’s right, now wasn’t the time to tell her everything, but…

“Asahina-san.”

I still wanted to console her. That's why I opened my mouth.

"What is it?" Asahina-san asked, her bright eyes opened wide, staring straight at me.

"Erm… It's like this. Actually, Asahina-san… well… how do you put this… Err… You're definitely not just Haruhi's plaything. And err… how did it go again? Something like… there's always something below the surface… groan~"

I gave up thinking about the proverb halfway through my sentence. No matter what I said, it would be full of plot holes. How annoying~ I had wanted to console her so that she would stop feeling so down, but apparently making up lines as I spoke was not my specialty, hence the half-assed sentences you see above. If it was Koizumi, he would surely be able to come out with some beautiful sounding nonsense which I would undoubtedly be annoyed at. However, a man should always know his limits. I couldn't always run to Nagato or Koizumi for help. This was my problem after all. I should solve it by my own.

Even so, this was just like giving a baboon the latest, high end computer but not telling him how to use it. Although I really wanted to console Asahina-san, my mind was totally void of any useful vocabulary.

"Erm… I mean…"

Maybe some physical stimulant would help. Perhaps it would speed up the flow of impulse. With that in mind, I knocked my skull with my fists. Nothing happened – my mind was still as blank as before.

"…… Err… Umm…"

In the end, all I did was err and umm, as if waiting for the sun to set.

That was until Asahina-san said—-

"Kyon-kun, you don't need to say any more."

I immediately lifted my head, and found myself staring into Asahina-san's confused eyes. Her mouth, however, was curled into a smile.

"You don't need to say any more."

She repeated.

"Whatever you're trying to say, I understand."

Asahina-san widened her smile, as she gently nodded.

Huh? You understand? Just what do you understand? I haven't said anything—-

“You really don’t have to say anymore. This is already enough.”

Asahina-san’s previously tightly closed lips parted open, as she looked at me with warm eyes. There was a faint but detectable trace of understanding in her eyes.

I suddenly realized something else.

Realize what, you say? Do you still need to ask?

What I realized was – Asahina-san had finally realized.

She may have realized, from my stuttering speech patterns, the true message I was trying to convey. Even though I never told her out loud. But why didn’t I? There are only a few explanations to this question.

“Ahh.”

Just as I was about to open my mouth to speak, Asahina-san gently raised her left hand, and placed her warm index finger on my freezing cold lips.

That was my cue to stop.

There wasn’t any reason to continue on. My thoughts had already reached Asahina-san. The both of us remained silent.

“Yeah.”

Asahina-san slowly lifted her index finger, and placed it on her own lips. That sent a wave of ripples through my heart.

“That’s right.”

That was all I could say.

Silence is gold, speech is silver. Wasn’t that the case? There wasn’t any pitcher in this world who needed to babble to the catcher what his next pitch was going to be like. There were highly convenient ways of communication in this world, such as through signals or body language. Simple matters need not be expressed through speech.

Why was that so? Well, it’s because even without saying it aloud, the both of us had already understood what was in each other’s hearts.

Since communication was possible even without the medium of speech, why bother? There was no need for vocabulary, no need for long winded speeches, and it certainly conserved energy.

The only response I could make, was to smile.

That was enough. Anything that couldn't be conveyed via speech would just have to be conveyed through the heart.

The following Monday.

The time was after school. Everyone gathered at the club room as always, trying the newly bought tea. After everyone had finished, the SOS Brigade commander said:

"Say, Kyon."

Unlike me, Haruhi had no sense of gratitude, as she downed the entire cup of burning, 70 degrees Celsius tea in less than two seconds. After all that trouble Asahina-san and I went through, couldn't you at least taste the damned tea?

"What?"

I replied as I secretly snuck a side glance at the smiling Asahina-san.

"Ahh… Do you want seconds?"

Asahina-san picked up the kettle, preparing to pour some tea into Haruhi's empty cup.

Haruhi suddenly leaned forward, and placed her chin in her hands, before uttering out some strange lines:

"I happen to have a habit of talking to myself."

Is that so? This was new. After knowing you for almost an entire year, this is the first time I've heard you've got such a habit.

"Even if there were others beside me, I would still carry on."

Before that, you should get a mental checkup.

"So, I'm going to start talking to myself again. If by any chance any of you hear it, please bear with me."

What are you trying to say? But before I could say that, Haruhi suddenly raised her voice, and said:

"You know, there's a smart and honest kid living near my house. He wears spectacles that resembles a professor and looks really smart in them. His name is…"

Haruhi mentioned a name that I was sure I had heard just recently. My back suddenly started to sweat, but that wasn't because of the heat.

Asahina-san froze on the spot.

"Soooooooooooooooooooometimes, I go over to help him with his homework. Which is why I went to his house yesterday. But that's when he said: The bunny girl's together with a guy."

Haruhi let out a spine-chilling smile.

"When we filmed that movie in autumn, he just so happened to be nearby. He had a really deep impression of Mikuru-chan in a bunny suit. Since we were on the same topic anyway, I asked him what that guy looked like. This is what he drew."

Haruhi took out a piece of paper that was clearly torn out from an exercise book. There was a rough sketch of a highly familiar face. Hmm… how come it seems like the one I would usually see every morning while looking in the mirror? Wait, that should be me. No matter how you look at it, it was my portrait drawn on the paper.

"Fufufufufufu~"

Haruhi suddenly let out a deep laugh.

That kid turned out to be a big mouthed yet talented artist! Isn't he supposed to become a scholar some day? Don't tell me he aspires to become an artist in the future? If I had known this, I would have bribed him, so that he would become temporarily mute and disabled.

My vision blurred for about three seconds, as I waited to see if a saint would suddenly descend to save the world.

Asahina-san was trembling all over, and her voice seemed to have lost its function. In a situation like this, chances that a new character would burst in were too slim, so I desperately swept my eyes around the club room.

"… … …"

After looking into Nagato's negative four degrees Celsius eyes, for some reason I felt sick to the stomach.

On the other hand, Koizumi did nothing but smile, as if thoroughly enjoying the entire situation. Wait a minute. These guys wouldn't have known everything from the start, would they?

"Hmm~?"

Haruhi's expression resembled one who had eaten an onigiri covered with blended chili paste and crushed psychedelic mushrooms , that is to say, one who wanted to laugh but was trying to restrain herself.

"Spit it out. Where did you and Mikuru-chan go yesterday, and what did you do? Don't worry, I promise I won't get mad."

I shot a sideways glance at Asahina-san, who resembled a frog drenched in green paint, her face green all over. I was one to talk, though, as cold sweat trickled endlessly down my face, like a toad being surrounded by three dozen serpents.

It must have been my illusion. For a moment I thought I saw Haruhi's aura rise up behind her, before turning into a violent display of fireworks, which proceeded to smash the glass window pane behind Nagato.. Or some illusion of that kind of extent.

"I'm sorry."

Koizumi stood up straight, as if wanting to avoid the invisible fireworks, before picking up his chair and moving away from the window pane.

Then, he made a gesture with both of his hands, and continued to smile like he used to. The only thing he missed out was the words "Please carry on."

Damn you Koizumi! I'll deal with you afterward by murdering you using big bets in poker! I'll remember this!

"A-ah… About t-that…"

The task at hand was to create a lie that would convince Haruhi. But right now, I really don't have the time to think of one, so could anyone out there please help me? If possible please text me, because even a courier service wouldn't be able to make it here in time.

Faced with my stuttering self, Haruhi decided to repeat her question.

"Well spit it out, and I want it to be so long and precise that even Koizumi-kun, Yuki and I can understand. Or else…"

Haruhi took in a deep breath, and revealed a bright smile, before saying:

"The both of you will be punished severely! That's right, how's this one seem?"

Haruhi announced a punishment so inhuman that even the blood stained gates of hell would tremble after hearing it. I looked at Asahina-san and found that she was shaking.

Just like I was.

What happened in the clubroom afterwards, this I think needs no further explanation.

Faced with Haruhi's sadistic smile, Nagato's even colder-than-usual expression and Koizumi's annoying smirk which seemed to suggest he was mildly enjoying this, I desperately racked my brain for some sort of explanation, like a lost soul furiously trying to squeeze out some water from a dry sponge in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Beside me, Asahina-san was thrown into a total state of panic, together with the kettle, tea leaves and all.

I really don't think I need to explain any further. You guys can probably guess the rest.

Author's Notes

Logically speaking there should be a long segment featured in this volume, but I decided to release this combination of medium to short stories. Unexpectedly, this actually continues the order of long segment, long segment, short segment, long segment and short segment in a recursive manner. It really is a coincidence so don't think too much about it.

Live A Live

The annual school festival is something that would leave one's heart dangling if the events of the day were left undescribed. As such, this piece is one where I am driven by the urge to think through the storyline clearly in my head and put it to paper. As for the lead role… Haruhi takes the stage.

Asahina Mikuru's Adventure Episode 00

Let's do a *Counterattack of Nagato Yuki Episode 00* and conclude the sonata with the *Awakening of Koizumi Itsuki Episode 00* altogether- although I don't know if this is feasible. Maybe I just want to experience the thrills of being a director. 'Haru' of Haruhi didn't appear once in here.

Charmed at First Sight LOVER

This interlude occurs after *Disappearence* and before *Snow Mountain Syndrome*. I've always loved American Football and watch the game often. It's a pity that Japanese wireless television channels rarely broadcast the games live and mostly skip to the end score. Nagato is the undisputed lead here no matter how you look at it.

Where did the Cat Go?

I was forced to come up with this story because Koizumi mentions the need for a cat in *Snow Mountain Syndrome*. Other than that I wanted to put my deduction to the test. The stars here would be Haruhi and Tsuruya-san.

The Melancholy of Asahina Mikuru

The long segment for the next volume will be on time and will be directly correlated to this piece. The lengthier piece that I am working on today becomes that much easier to pen thanks to me slaving away and frying my brain cells trying to connect the magazine parts with the newly written long segments. Most importantly however is to give the readers an easier time to follow along, and to ask for nothing more.

It is an honor to see this series continue to its sixth volume. I have only gratitude other than gratitude from my heart. This book is able to come to its fruition due to the assistance of everyone that toiled in the process, and especially due to the readers that have supported this series throughout the way. I offer the sincerest of thanks to everyone.

With that, see you in the next volume.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

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